

December 1979

"Life Before Man"

A Selection from the New Novel by Margaret Atwood

★ **THE NORTH AMERICAN** ★

ISSN 0029-2397

REVIEW

\$2.00

**Other Fiction by Lee K. Abbott, Richard Brook,
Elizabeth Inness-Brown, John Wideman, and Monica Yates**



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Clarence Major

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Ronald Sukenick

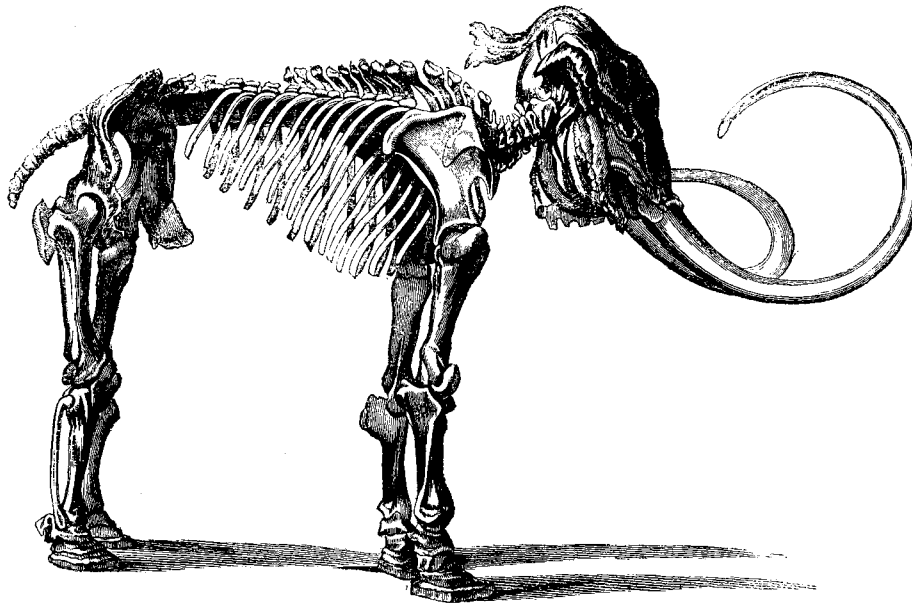
"Quick now, read him before he invents again!" said *The New York Times Book Review* about Ronald Sukenick's 98.6. Set on an unnamed island composed of bits of an international post-industrial culture, Sukenick's latest novel, *Long Talking Bad Conditions Blues*, traces a brief period in the lives of a group of contemporary exiles. Underemployed, misemployed, they wander from bar to bar, lover to lover, and idea to idea in brilliant conversations that spin and unravel endlessly, testifying to the "accelerated shatter" of their social lives, love lives, and souls.

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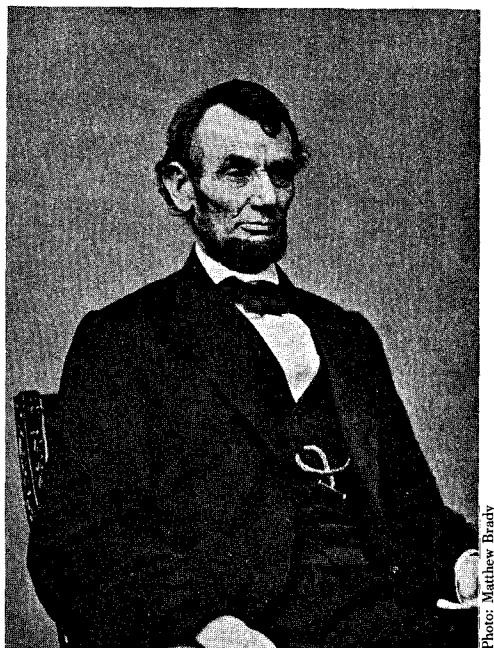
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What
Sort of Person
Reads The
North American
Review?

EDITORIAL NOTE.

The publishers of the North American Review have had the honor of receiving the following letter from the President of the United States.

“Executive Mansion,
Washington, January 16, 1864.

“Messrs. Crosby and Nichols:—

“Gentlemen: The number for this month and year of the North American Review was duly received, and for which please accept my thanks. Of course I am not the most impartial judge; yet, with due allowance for this, I venture to hope that the article entitled ‘The President’s Policy’ will be of value to the country. I fear I am not quite worthy of all which is therein kindly said of me personally.

“The sentence of twelve lines, commencing at the top of page 252, I could wish to be not exactly as it is. In what is there expressed, the writer has not correctly understood me. I have never had a theory that Secession could absolve States or people from their obligations. Precisely the contrary is asserted in the Inaugural Address; and it was because of my belief in the continuation of these obligations, that I was puzzled, for a time, as to denying the legal rights of those citizens who remained individually innocent of treason or rebellion. But I mean no more now than to merely call attention to this point.

“Yours respectfully,

“A. Lincoln.”

[Nothing could have been further from the intention of the Editors than to misrepresent the opinions of the President. They merely meant that, in their judgment, the policy of the Administration was at first such as practically to concede to any rebel who might choose to profess loyalty, rights under the Constitution whose corresponding obligations he repudiated.]

From The North American Review, April 1864

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Founded in 1815

Volume 264, Number 4

Winter 1979

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Early this fall Alberta's Premier Peter Lougheed announced that the province would lend money to French Canada from the fabled Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund. Having already loaned more than \$270 million to Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Manitoba, and Newfoundland, Lougheed has now opened the teller's wicket to Quebec. His move not only dramatized the enormous wealth that Alberta has in ready reserve, it also marked in heavy lines the growing importance of the province in determining the future of the Canadian nation. As banker to the other provinces, Alberta bends that future to its own design. No longer is Canada identified only by the traditional political and economic institutions controlled by old line forces in the east. The character of the nation now is being shaped on the oil rich plains of the west, shaped by the frontier executive mind. It is a mind largely unconcerned with the forms of tradition but deeply given to immediate, practical strategies for survival and for dominance.

"What's happening is that the governance of this country is becoming dominated by a new configuration of political forces that straddle the Rockies," wrote a cautious Canadian journalist from the east a few weeks ago. "The priests of this new civilization reside in Alberta and Peter Lougheed, their blue-eyed pope, is determined that from now on the future of this country is going to be decided by three players—not just Ontario and Quebec as in the past."

Not only in politics and finance does Alberta look ahead with confidence. The province also has large ambitions in the arts. With government help these past few years, the arts in Alberta have been growing like the barley on the plains, producing a kind of native-north, Canadian-west, culture product. In nearly every way the product reflects the free, popular, egalitarian, practical, western society from which it springs.

There is very little snob appeal in Alberta art. The *avant garde* have almost as much difficulty gaining acceptance in Edmonton as they do in Cold Lake. But music, drama, painting, and literature that reflect the



The Indian & the Fish: A Report on Culture in Alberta

open experience of the plains, that appeal to plain folks and satisfy their needs for recreation and amusement, have almost unlimited support from the government—unlimited, that is, until the art form can become self-sufficient. In the best western tradition, the arts in Alberta are encouraged to be free and popular but they are warned not to rely for long on assistance (charity) from a rich but ruggedly practical provincial government. Once you have a start, they are told, do not look to the Minister of Culture for constant support. Art justifies itself, they are told, by appealing to people, by becoming popular, and thus art must, like nearly everything else in Alberta, eventually make some money.

* * *

There is no doubt that Alberta cultural leaders hope their style will become the style of the nation. "Already in the forefront of Canadian art . . ." an Alberta brochure begins. "There is something unique, distinctly Canadian about what we do . . ." visitors are told. Exhibits of Alberta sculpture and painting are sent touring around the world. Alberta performing arts groups rock Japan. And if Alberta literature has not yet displaced the study of Milton at the University of Toronto, it has found millions of breathless readers through the romances of Harlequin books.

David S.R. Leighton, Director of the cultural center at Banff, recently published an essay about culture in Alberta in which he spoke of the combination of government aid and private initiative in the arts as "the envy of every other province." He praised the Alberta government for offering assistance to artists in their

early years and expecting them to stand on their financial feet later on. "There are too many in the arts who feel the world owes them a living, that the government should somehow come up with the money to allow them to 'do their thing,'" he wrote. "They issue blanket appeals for greater funds and condemn, out of hand, any cutbacks without ever thinking through what it is they are asking."

"Where else in Canada—where else anywhere—is there such proliferation of the arts in every form, in an area with a population of one and a half million?" wrote Leighton proudly of the success of Alberta's programs in the arts.

The Honorable Horst Schmid, a man who looks and talks very much like a younger Henry Kissinger, is the enthusiastic, excitable, tireless, pot-bellied, sentimental, forty-eight year old Bavarian immigrant who is most responsible for the proliferation of arts in Alberta and for the ways in which they have developed. As Minister of Culture and Recreation for the past seven years (Schmid was this year rotated to the job of Minister of Trade, such rotation being traditional in the province), Schmid encouraged the arts to seek their own ethnic and geographic identities, taught the arts that they must eventually learn to forage for themselves in the free marketplace, led them to see that their success was in their popularity.

An elaborate array of cultural offices and departments reports to the Minister of Culture. The Cultural Development Division of the government comprises eight major divisions of action including Visual Arts, Performing Arts, Film and Literary Arts, Library Services, and Cultural Heritage. In addition, there are minor areas that include museums,

archaeological sites, historic sites, archives. Altogether these cultural activities spent about \$20,000,000 of the province's money two years ago; the figure will probably double this year. The figure is small when compared with the money spent on petroleum research or medical research projects. But spokespeople within the Division say the twenty million is a very meaningful invest-



ment because the province "got its money's worth for every penny spent."

Horst Schmid led the Ministry of Culture and Recreation for seven years from Room 324 of the Legislative Building in Edmonton. The room is narrow, dark, nineteenth-century diplomatic, with a large desk at one end and a high narrow window behind the desk. The walls of the room are covered with knick-knacks on shelves, knick-knacks in glass cases, mementoes of Schmid love for and by the multitude of Alberta's ethnic groups. There are bookcases with art titles, Chinese scrolls, huge glass cases full of trophies and Ukrainian Easter Eggs and tiny figures of Mounties and Indians and animals. Much of this clutter is in shadow and suggests the indolence of some Washington Irving, old-country tale rather than the industry and energy of prairie Canada. Schmid has collected all of these things because people want to do things for him. People like to give him things. He is one of the most popular men in the province. He is known to love equally opera and oom-pah bands and musical comedy; he is a kind of provincial symbol of cultural diversity and ethnic identity.

Schmid is delighted to have visitors. He talks excitedly about the province, about Edmonton, about galleries and museums and grants and theatres. As he talks he moves about the room, to the desk to leaf through some papers, back to a leather chair beside his guest where Schmid crosses his legs and rocks back and forth, then out of the room to an outside office to return with programs, pamphlets, books, maps, prints, catalogues, charts. All of these things he deposits happily with the visitor, building in the visitor's lap and on the floor beside mounds of evidence on the state of the health of culture in Alberta.

"Culture must stand by itself, take care of itself, that is the only way," he says. "... Alberta is not afraid of the United States culture. We will make our own. And sometimes we will take what we need. We welcome good things from everybody. Is that wrong? What about barber shop quartet singing? That's from the United States, isn't it? Well, I've encouraged barber shop quartet here. ... There was a traveling exhibit of Alberta paintings in

"The matter of employment for Alberta artists has been given continuous attention."

Annual Report of Alberta Culture
1977-78

Europe last year. Some well known critic there, I think it was in *Figaro*, said it was the art of Alberta that was unique, not, how do you say that, derivative. I would take you down and show you that exhibit right now but it is in Japan, my friend. ... No, not many people out here think about imitating the English in our arts. I have never encouraged that kind of thing. I think incest is very unhealthy. ... This pop singer came to me a few years ago. She said she wanted to sing opera. Of course, she had good credentials. You must have good credentials. She had a letter from her teacher, I forget where he was living. Anyway, she had good credentials, so I gave her a grant out of the Minister's budget and she went to Europe and studied singing and she came back a few years after that and sang *Tosca* in Edmonton. Wonderful, just wonderful. ... I think the arts must belong to the people. I spend the province's money to help the artists to make people happy. That is very important, to make the people happy. ...

"You see, my friend, there is an art policy here in Alberta that the Minister will match funds raised by any performing arts group in the province. Or if the people in some little farm town want a show and they raise some money for it, we will match the money to see to it that they get something good, a good show, something they will like. So I went around to all the towns a few years ago and told people about this policy. At one meeting some *avant garde* man, I won't tell you who it was but he was in ballet and he was very good at that and afterwards he went somewhere else, to Europe, I think, and was very successful, well, this *avant garde* man got up at the meeting and said our policy was not fair. He said he could not get the people to contribute to his art because the people were not ready for it yet, they did not want to go see his ballet even though it was very good. He said it was not fair for us just to match funds, what about art like his ballet that was very good and needed help but could not get people to pay to see it and so it did not have any funds to match. I told him one

thing, 'If people do not want to see your art, you deserve to go broke.' That is the way I think about art here. ... Since I have been Minister of Culture and Recreation—remember Recreation is there too—the culture budget has gone from almost nothing, that was in 1972, to a great deal of money today. We spend more money for culture for every citizen than any other province in Canada. I am very proud of the progress. My friend, the Minister of Culture job is today a very honored place in the government. ... This is my country now. I came here when I was seventeen years old and could not speak any English. This country has been good for me. When I called my Mother back in Bavaria and told her I was made a Minister she said to me, 'Yes, sure, and the Arabs built a church for Christ here in your town.' She did not believe me. This kind of thing happens only here, here in Alberta. So this is my home now. I want to make people happy here. ... My friend, I have two principles in my life. The one is this, you only pass this way once so help as many people as you can. The other one is this, the ship that is afraid to sail out of the harbor into the storm will never bring back the valuable cargo. ..."

While some realists would occasionally temper Schmid's fervor—"If art and culture in Alberta had one-half of one percent of the grants and tax concessions the Loughheed administration has given foreign oil companies since 1971, Alberta would really be the Mecca of world art," said one Edmonton critic—there is no doubt that he has accomplished a great deal during his time as Minister.

The effects of Schmid's efforts for culture can be seen everywhere in the province but especially, of course, in the cities: museums, theatre buildings, auditoriums, galleries, libraries, posters announcing art exhibits and touring musical productions, offices of cultural affairs scattered in high rise metropolitan buildings. These effects mirror the enormous differences that exist among Alberta's varied population groups — differences in education, ethnic heritage, wealth, diverse and multiple tastes from folk dance to beer garden to opera to pop. Schmid has been especially careful to preserve and promote the arts of Alberta's many ethnic groups. "Alberta is a province settled and inhabited by many different peoples, the diversity

of whose culture gives a depth and richness to life," proclaimed the Alberta Heritage Day Act of 1974.

A European correspondent visiting Edmonton to see the sights recently was nearly lyric in praise of what he found, "... four theatre buildings, each of which is showier than the others Musicals are on the program more than *avant garde* theatre. But the citizens notice that the wealth of their community is not reflected only in skyscrapers or freeways but also in temples to the muses"

Albertans seem generally to like all of this activity in the arts. It appears that many citizens are learning to enjoy. The idea that artists must support themselves, that art must sell, is especially popular, not only among ordinary citizens but even among art people. As Horst Schmid's ballet story indicated, economic success of artists is a matter of genuine concern in Alberta.

The Department of Visual Arts regularly publishes a tabloid newsletter that contains a great deal of valuable, practical information for artists. The April, 1979, issue contained an essay "The Artist and His public: Has the Pioneer Mentality Died?" by Calgary writer Roslyn McCarthy.

Up until its recent enormous growth, Alberta has been a rural community with somewhat of a frontier mentality. Out of necessity, the role of the arts was minimal in the everyday lives of Albertans, and what was exhibited and promoted in the visual arts fell into the hands of a select few. Today, interest in the visual arts is expanding. Although gallery hopping is still not the pastime it is in Toronto or Montreal

Just as we, the public, must learn to deal with our inferior complex [sic] in the art world, the artist, at the same time, has a responsibility to himself and the economic/profit-oriented society he lives in. Unless he has some other sources of income, the full-time professional artist wants to sell his work. And it is up to him to learn how to go about doing this

Artists must assert themselves in a pragmatic context and learn that commercial success means selling their paintings—not their soul

Amid all of the diversity of practical developed culture in Alberta, the Literary Arts Program directed by



John Patrick Gillese is one of the most provocative, perhaps the most representative. Gillese has developed an elaborate program based on democratic prairie values that aims at making Alberta writers financially successful citizens. Popular success is paramount among Gillese's canon of literary values. "If somebody out there prints two hundred copies of a little magazine and sells eighty, what good is that?" says Gillese. He firmly believes writing must pay.

Either Gillese is a native Albertan or else he came to the province from Ireland very early in life. Accounts vary, but his claim to Irish ancestry is

solidly supported by his accent and his patterns of speech. His thin, dark face broken with tiny lines of red calls up the arch-Irishman of the roaring pub. Gillese is not a young man. He claims to have supported himself and a large family for thirty years through free-lance writing before he became Director of the Department. "His short stories, features and columns have been read in some 200 publications in Canada, the United States and Great Britain, as well as translated into French, German and Finnish," is the way he described his work in a 1967 anthology of Alberta writing which he edited. "The Al-



berta bush country forms a background for much of his writing, including a book of short stories, Kirby's Gander, the lead story of which became the motion picture *Wings of Chance*. He has written documentary films His practical experience with writing for pay makes Gillese the ideal literary leader in Horst Schmid's practical program. Gillese's lack of formal, traditional, academic training in literature appears to be a distinct asset as he develops popular writers for the province.

"It's the old story about the Indian and the fish," Gillese tells me. "Is it better to give the Indian a fish every day, or teach him to fish? What do you think?" He looks directly at me for a moment and smiles.

We are up in Edmonton's CN

forth in front of us on the table like a horizontal metronome, rising over the tea cups each time it passes between us. Gillese does not appear to be entirely comfortable with conversation. Most of the time when he is talking he is looking away from me, away beyond the square tables and chairs, beyond the empty serving area with gleaming steel coffee urns, beyond the door. Perhaps he would like to leave. For whatever reason, he is apprehensive, as if there is some unstruck threat beneath our talk.

"I remember when she came up here to talk to me the first time. She sat right there in the very chair you're in right now, that very chair. I told her she had talent but she would have to work very hard if she wanted to sell in the big time," he says. "She lived

phone and told her she had won the big prize. 'Alls I want to do is cry,' she told me over the telephone. 'Alls I want to do is cry.' Things like that make my job here as director well worth the while."

Gillese's talk circles around writing for money, prizes, commercial markets, publishers that "pay big," television rights, reprints, foreign outlets. "If somebody out there prints two-hundred copies of a little magazine and sells eighty, what good is that?" he says again. "We must encourage talent when it is getting a start but how do you know it's talent unless people want to read it? . . . We have writers here in our program who sold to Harlequin, *Reader's Digest*, to *Redbook*. . . . There is tremendous interest in our first novel contest. . . . We really like to see our writers make it big. . . ."

Nearly all of Gillese's energies appear to be directed toward promoting the careers of Albertans who want to write for cash. There is very little academic, literary, high-culture activity in his department. Unsung genius remains unsung. A successful writer sells, and the bigger the sale the greater the success. Good Art is a commodity that pleases the buying public.

"Do the people in literature out at the University work with you on your programs?" I ask him.

"One or two out there give us some help, but most, they don't care what we're doing. Most of the arts in Edmonton don't get much support from the university people. They don't seem to care about anything we do."

I ask him about the Canada Council. The question brings forth an explosive reply.

"People in Alberta hate the Canada Council. They think the Canada Council is a bunch of liberals; that's where the *avant garde* stuff gets started. People here are conservative. They want art they can understand, not that crazy stuff that makes no sense to a decent person. All that far-out stuff gets money from the Council. People here don't like that. People in Edmonton hate, I mean *hate* the Canada Council. That's why we keep away from that kind of stuff."

I ask him if the Literary Arts Program supports any young poets.

"We'd support a poet in a minute if it looked like he was going to be suc-



Building, in the cafeteria a floor below Gillese's 12th floor suite of offices. The time is two in the afternoon. We are drinking tea made from tea bags and sitting at a chrome and formica institutional table in a corner of the wide room. There is a wall of windows directly behind Gillese's back and Edmonton is spread out, flat, below and beyond. Gillese keeps one hand inside his thin, brown check suit coat that hangs loosely on his shoulders. The other hand moves automatically back and

with her father in one of those little towns south of here, and wouldn't you know, he was a minister. Ministers in those little towns don't make much money, you know. But she had to leave her husband and she took the children—there were two children, beautiful little children—and went to live with her father. And every day she wrote on her book. She wrote on that novel every day. And she dreamed of selling it in the big time. . . . I'll never forget her voice that day when I called her on the tele-

Facing: Citadel Theatre (top)—"One of the most modern theatre buildings on the North American continent," in the words of a province spokesman—and Commonwealth Stadium (bottom), home of the Edmonton Eskimos, the city's franchise in the Canadian Football League. Above: Winston Churchill Square and City Hall, in the center of Edmonton. The CN building, which houses the Literary Arts Division of Alberta Culture, is the high-rise at left.

cessful. We'd like to support a poet. There aren't very many Leonard Cohens around here, though. The trouble here is poets don't seem to be able to get their act together. Honestly, we don't do as much with poetry as we'd like to. See,"—here he looks around the nearly empty cafeteria and seeing that no one is watching us, no one is listening to our conversation, lowers his voice and leans toward me—"see, a poet around here writes 'fuck' five times on a piece of paper, maybe a napkin from the cafeteria or something, and he says, 'That's my poem!' That's what they show us and call poetry here. We're certainly not going to give any money for that kind of thing. That's what we're up against with the poets here."

In its efforts to stimulate writing in the province, Gillese's department provides a wide variety of publications, competitions, programs, workshops, consultants, courses, for both new and experienced writers. One of the most popular programs and one that appears to be Gillese's favorite is the Search-For-A-New-Alberta-Novelist Competition which has been in existence since 1972. The competition is open only to Albertans and is limited to first time novelists.

Winner of the contest receives an outright prize of \$2500 from Alberta Culture. The author also receives from Macmillan Company of Canada an advance royalty of \$1500 and a standard royalty contract if "in the opinion of the Macmillan Company the chosen script is deemed suitable for publication." To date, four authors have won: Jan Truss of Water Valley with *Bird at the Window* in 1972, Betty Wilson of Edmonton with *Andre Tom Macgregor* in 1973, Pauline Gedge of Hanna with *Child of the Morning* in 1975, and Laurali Rose (Bunny) Wright of Edmonton with *Neighbours* in 1978.

"The acclaim accorded these novelists has been nothing short of outstanding," says a descriptive pamphlet distributed by Gillese's department. "*Child of the Morning* has already become something of a literary sensation. It received \$25,000 in advance royalties from Dial Press of New York and within 12 months went through four hard cover printings in the U.S. alone. Paperback rights brought \$71,500 (U.S.) from New American Library and by mid-June, 1978, was on Canadian (paperback)

best seller lists. British rights—with good advances—were sold. . . ."

* * *

Gillese's department produces *Alberta Authors Bulletin*, a bi-monthly publication containing advice for writers, announcements of competitions, hints, tips, letters. Nearly all of the material in the bulletin is related directly to problems in marketing writing, techniques for selling. "How Long Till That First Sale" is the lead article in the March, 1979, issue. It deals with the department's correspondence courses and the students who enroll.

The current crop of correspondence course students is just the same as every group that has gone before. For those wondering how long it takes before an editor reaches for his cheque book—and for others wondering just which editors are apt to be most receptive—it might be worthwhile to recount the brief literary history of Chris Dunkley of Calgary, who sent in the 10th and final lesson of the course in non-fiction at the beginning of the new year. . . .

Chris Dunkley sold two articles before he completed the course.

"Why Short Stories Sell" and "Cashing In On the Past" are two recent lead articles in the bulletin that were written by Gillese himself. "Cashing In On the Past" deals with problems in writing regional history. "Since we believe the laborer is worthy of his hire — that the writer

must earn if he is to practice his craft with dignity — what should be charged for doing a community history?" is Gillese's practical question

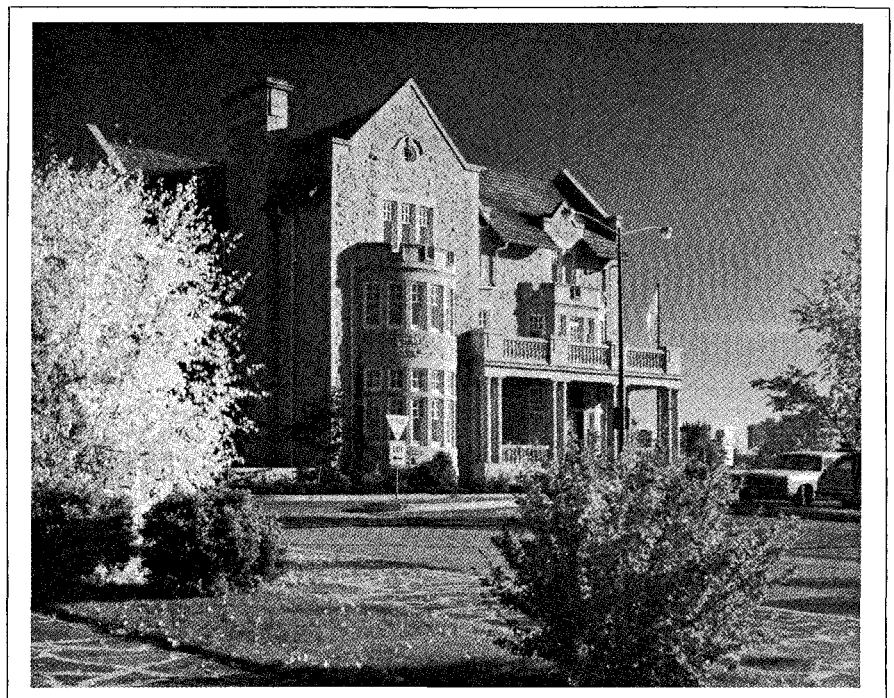


The Honorable Horst Schmid, presently Alberta's Minister of Trade, but from 1972 to 1979 Minister of Culture and Recreation. Below, a view of Government House, in Edmonton.

midway through the article. The answer, he promises, will be given at a forthcoming department-sponsored workshop.

The bulletin frequently contains articles that develop Gillese's idea about popularity being the direct result of genius or craft. One of the most thorough of these articles appeared early this year under the heading, "Identifying a Great Book".

You have just written a book, *Reflections of a Cow on Her Way to the*



Slaughter House, which has been published by Hey Diddle Diddle Publishing Company. Only 800 copies sell, but you can console yourself with the fact that there is literature and literature—and the best of writers was often unappreciated in his time.

The nagging thought remains, however. *Are you kidding yourself?* If you are going to become a professional writer—an author who can work full time at this exacting craft—it is surely important to analyze just what does constitute a good book? (It might also help the educators and others who must sit in judgment on books for curriculum inclusion.)

The article goes on to quote a *Reader's Digest* article by Mortimer J. Adler in which Adler is quoted as saying that great books are popular and enduring bestsellers.

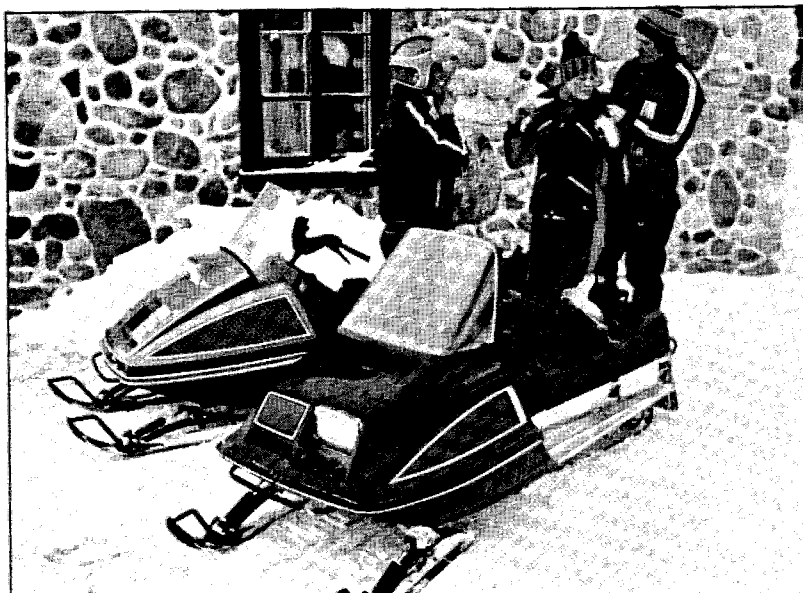
Perhaps the whole of Gillese's practical approach to writing (and Schmid's insistence on art for the province that is popular) is caught in a letter to the bulletin from a Joanne Benger of Drayton Valley. The letter appeared in a 1977 edition of the bulletin.

It is now three years since I signed up for that course in fiction writing and to date, I haven't sold a solitary piece of real fiction. I am not rich or famous either. However, I am what you promised to teach me to be—a selling, published writer!

I am a poet. . . . Now I am in one anthology plus I have appeared in two magazines. . . . I just enlarged a story for *Canadian Children's Magazine* and I have a story in the winter issue of *Jabberwocky*. The *Zap* reader is still considering that 'first sale' of mine. . . . I am a humorous columnist appearing in two monthly publications—"A Farm Wife's Almanac" in Saskatchewan's *Farm Light and Power* and "A Poor Writer's Almanac" in *Cartoon Newsarama* from Rhode Island, USA. . . . I am just a nice humorous literary type in *Beaver Canadiana*, *Word Gardens*, *Texas Traveller* and *Modus Operandi*. I sold a home remedy to *Well-Being*. I still place the odd recipe, household hint and short anecdote. I'm not proud. . . .

—Leo J. Hertz

Right: Two advertisements for the Canadian prairies, one (top) placed in U.S. magazines on behalf of Canadian tourism, the other in Canadian magazines on behalf of the Arts in the province of Alberta.



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It was by virtue of a hat-check girl (that's not a wholly accurate beginning, but let it stand) that I was conveyed into the upper echelons of jazz. Penny was wildly attractive and, to me, attractively wild. I, up from college all neat and shiny, must have reminded her of apples and scouts. Which is not to accuse her of sentimentality. I recall an afternoon when we were lazing a sunny hour away in Washington Square Park. Two little girls, about six and eight, came along the asphalt walk skipping, holding hands and giggling. Penny opened an eye for a moment. "Get them," she said. "Why don't I tell them what it's all about? Hey, kids!" she yelled. Happily they kept on going. This was in Greenwich Village, New York City, 1940 or '41. Just before we went into World War II. None of us, it turned out, knew what it was all going to be about or that we were watching some last picture show of innocence.

Penny worked at the Village Vanguard, a small nightclub on Seventh Avenue that claimed to be in the vanguard of jazz offerings and was, though many people who went to it wore hats. It was (and probably still is) a basement room shaped like a piece of pie, with the bar at the crust end and the performers at the point. Wall seats, and small discs of tables crowded into the middle. Everybody smoked. The night I remember, going down there to see Penny, a space had been cleared in the center of the room and some people were standing. In the middle of the space, sitting on a chair that didn't look as if it could hold him, was a block-shaped Negro with a mat of iron-gray hair holding the largest guitar I'd ever seen. Though I was taking some guitar lessons I didn't know there was such a thing as a twelve-string guitar, nor had I heard of anyone named Ledbetter or Leadbelly. Neither had most of the other people there. It was one of his earliest appearances in New York, I was told, up from a string of prisons in the South and in Texas. When he began playing he took that roomful of people up in his hand as if it were a toy. We just got picked up and taken along on the huge railroad go-ahead of that chugging guitar, the Rock Island Line, with a big, river-flowing voice alongside. He sang us stories of life in that entrancing,

Jazz: Three Recollections

frightening land of the Black South. Chain gangs, company stores, cathouses, shootings and knifings and endless fleeing. Goodbye, and goodbye. See you in my dreams. Ballads, pure and sweet. From behind a curtain at the point of the room a lacy guitar sent out wisps of notes that fluttered, fooled, and danced along the track of the big twelve-stringer. That was Josh White, the charmer. Custard.

I forget why Leadbelly came over to my table. Had he seen me with Penny? No, he wouldn't see Penny, or else he'd have seen her as she saw those children. No, he probably saw an empty chair, an uncomplicated face, and nowhere else as easy to go in that jammed room. When it turned out I was quiet it suited him fine. He came back after the next set. Later, whenever I went to the Vanguard I went alone and kept an empty seat. Between sets he'd come over and we'd drink with hardly a word. He usually drank straight rye at those times, which he called being on the wagon. I never saw him smile. Yet I

felt him, I still feel him, as a gentle man. Yes, I know he killed. I suppose I knew then, at some point. It wasn't real, not only in the sense that killing is unreal if it's done by the person sitting quietly across the table from you, but because it felt unreal for this man, it wasn't anywhere near his center. What he did have was a Keep Off sign in the frontyard of his face.

Up from the Vanguard, across Seventh Avenue and down a way was Nick's, with Bud Freeman and Peewee Russell and Vic Dickinson and Dixieland, which I didn't like much, and Frankie Newton, whom I did. I forget how I met him, but the jazz-club world wasn't in modern terms either big or populous, the players weren't rich or rushed. If you really liked their music, you'd meet them. You could even feel that they'd meet *you*, that you could be real for them. (I recall at a college party Chick Webb with the teenage Ella Fitzgerald, and I was sitting near the band, whiskied o'er with a bright cast, drumming on the table, presumably along with Mr. Webb. I was an awful drummer. He just smiled, nodded, and pretended to follow my flapping beat. Tolerance all over the place, though the word wasn't yet in use.) Frankie Newton. Frankie kept an afterhours place, not for business but for playing music after the business of music was over. It was a one-room coldwater flat pushing up above the Third Avenue Elevated tracks. The furniture was old car seats along a wall, a plank bench, a card table for the booze, and an assortment of wooden chairs for the players. Over all the windows were black window-shades, nailed down. At three in the morning when Frankie and whatever others, usually no more than five or six at a time, finished at the clubs they'd drift over to Frankie's place, take a slow drink, a cigarette, and one by one pick up the horns again and begin slowly, quietly, to play for themselves. Of us non-players sitting silently against the walls, there might be three there might be five, never a lot. There was a bottle or two of whatever kind of booze, some water, Dixie cups. They'd put the mutes in and they'd play, they'd rest, we'd smoke and sip. There was no noise, and no making of it. The occasional rumble of a passing train only empha-



sized the separateness of the room, a disembodied place of no windows, no relation to outside, no time moving, just stillness and music, music and silence carrying on their dialogue. I remember a sense of contented aloneness. Different. Alone with others. We arrived and left one by one.

* * *

Of course music is rhythm—rhythm primeval, I believe—and rhythm is sensuousness and sensuousness is beauty and beauty is careless love. I met Billie Holliday. Oh my. White gardenia flashing in her black hair, a live perfume. I may have seen her in my dreams but I heard her while awake. Any time of day that liquid, bereft voice would start singing inside my head. She was working uptown, on 52nd Street. The Onyx Club, another of those basement rooms that jazz lived in then, as if under the streets of Paris. Billie made no pretense—if she felt fine she showed it, if she didn't she showed it. Some nights after a set she'd come over to my table (here they were square instead of round, but still miniaturized), sit down, have a drink with me. Other times she'd walk past indifferent as air. I had no knowledge, no sense, of the realities of her life—childhood prostitution, hard drugs. Drugs weren't up front in those days. Real sophisticates knew about marijuana, but few tried it. We had all seen films of Warner Oland in the opium dens of Limehouse. I must have amused her. There's evidence that I did. One night after a set she came over to my table and said, "Come on back to my dressing room, I want to show you something." Flattered (but not to the point of fantasy), I followed her back through the fake black walls to a narrow corridor. She opened the door into a room the size of a walk-in closet. There was a chair, a dressing table with a taped leg, and occupying most of the space that was left the biggest Boxer dog I'd ever seen. "How do you like my new dog?" she said. "Fine," I said falsely, "what's his name?" "I don't know yet," she said, opening a drawer in the dressing table and taking out what I recognized as a marijuana cigarette (a stick of tea, it was called then). She broke it in half and threw one of the pieces toward the dog, who caught it in mid-air, chomped it and swallowed. "Holy smoke," I said (probably) . . . "Listen, is he going to

obey you after he eats that?" "Honey," she said, "after he eats that, *I* obey *him*."



There was so much music around in those clubs: Jack Teagarden, Mildred Bailey, Roy Eldredge, Max Kaminsky, Zutty Singleton, Sidney Catlett; Maxine Sullivan and the Kirby group; Chick Webb and Ella; Albert Ammons and Pete Johnson, Mary Lou Williams, Art Tatum, Fats Waller. . . . You could crisscross 52nd Street and hear ten or fifteen of them in one block; the same around Sheridan Square in the Village, where for

good measure they'd throw in an occasional youngster like Zero Mostel between sets. And despite the marvelous lady singers it was a man's world. Self-contained, self-absorbed, structured. You didn't have to read music, or read at all for that matter, but you had to know the whole literature of popular music (and you could in those early days, like Battista Alberti in the early Renaissance had read every book there was); you had to be a consummate craftsman, able to work seamlessly within groups that were often headlong and unpredictable, yet measured results in terms of precision; and on occasion you had to be able to stand up and free-associate within boundaries, without hesitation, and with a result no one had ever heard exactly like that before. These men often had the look of scholars; their music was partly exegesis, Talmudic refinements. That was the top layer. In the middle was the bone-sadness of Black history in America. And underneath, the primal beat. "Feet like a bear, neck like a swan," I'd feel, listening, doing my part.

—Kenneth Lash

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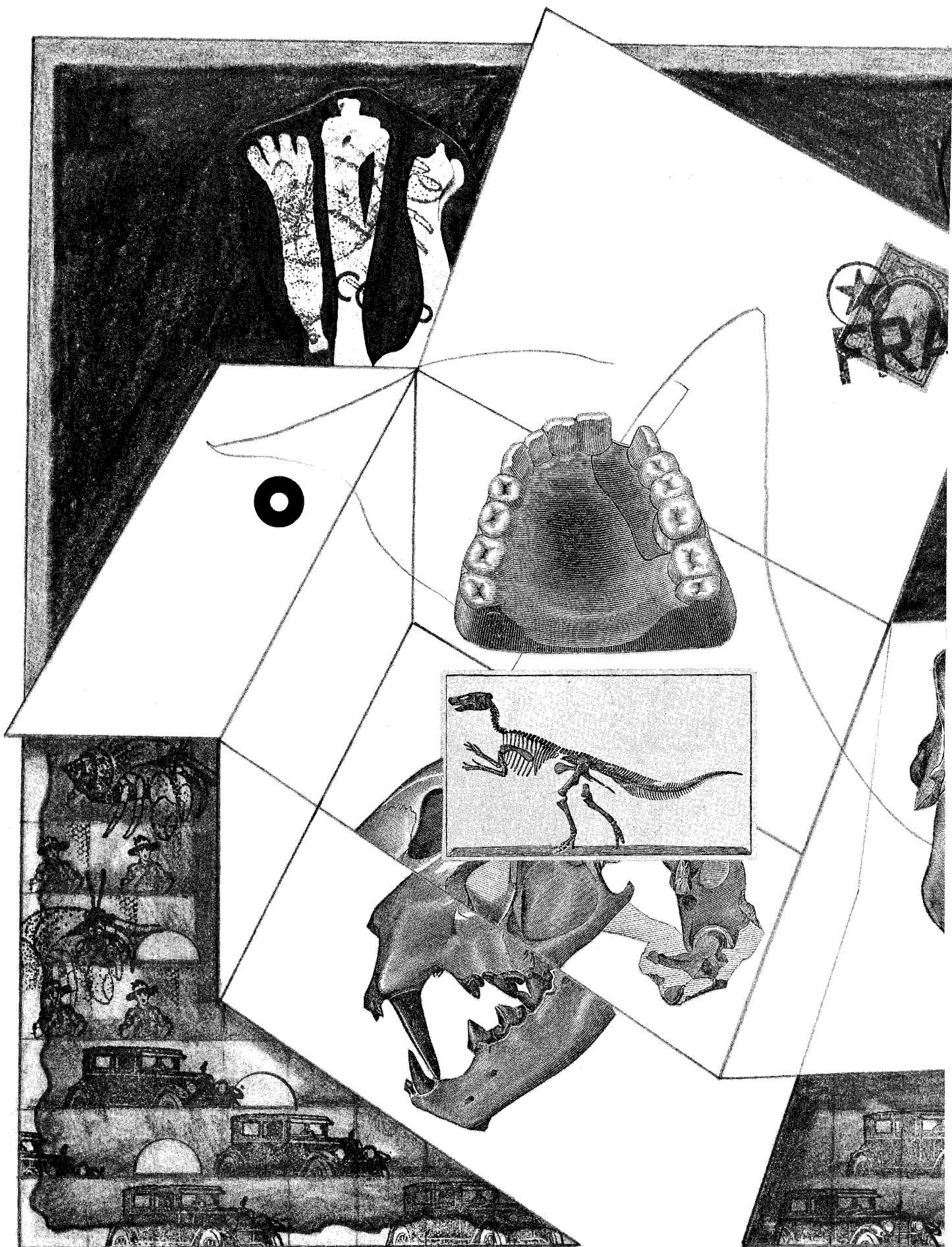
Daniel Cahill on Kosinski and His Critics

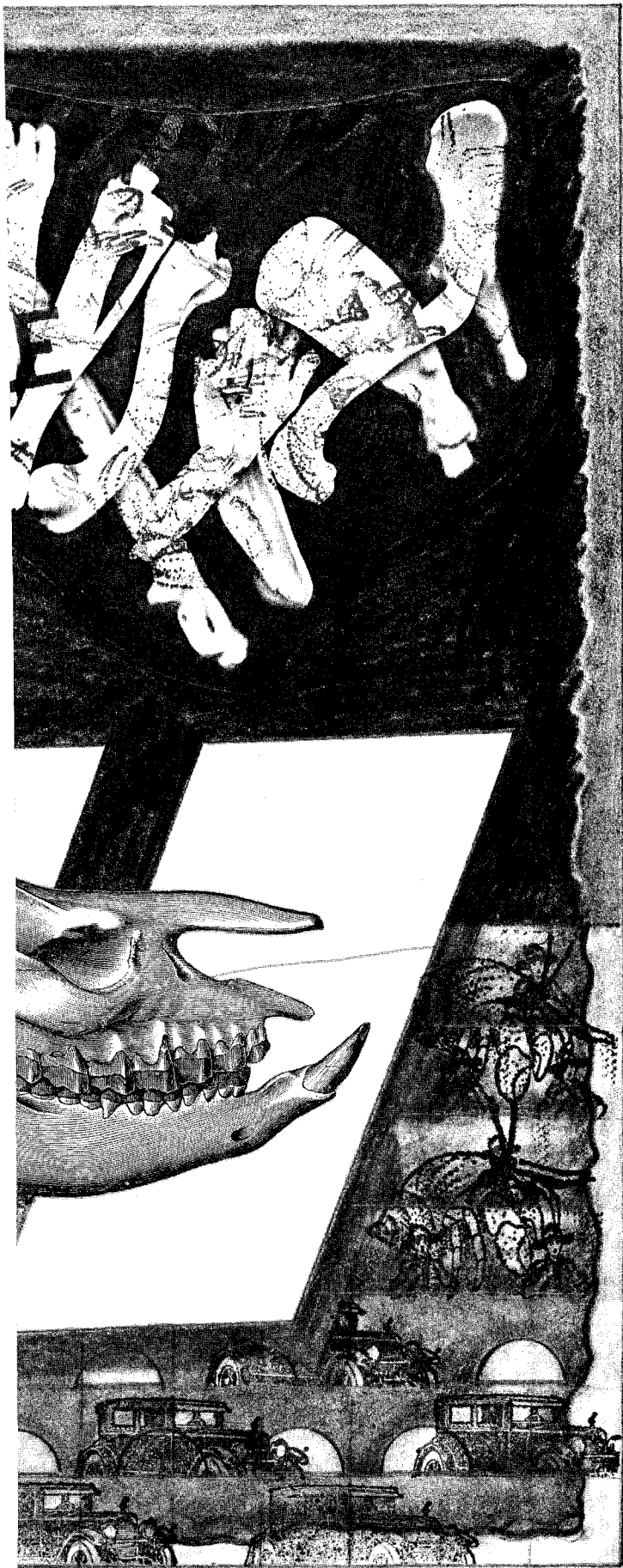
Frederic Will on Touring the Baja Peninsula

Thomas Thompson on Sulloway on Freud

Fiction by John Mort, Barry Lopez, Jonathan Baumbach, Matt Cohen, John C. Hall, and others.

Poetry by Dara Wier, T.R. Hummer, William Pitt Root, Jack Myers, and others.





Roy Behrens

Margaret Atwood

Life Before Man

Saturday, January 15, 1977

LESJE

Lesje is doing something seedy. If someone, one of her friends, Marianne for instance, was doing the same thing and told her about it, she would think: seedy. Or even tacky. Very tacky, to be having an affair with a married man, a married man with two children. Married men with children are proverbially tacky, with their sad stories, their furtive lusts and petty evasions. Tackier still to be doing it in a hotel, of necessity a comparatively tacky hotel, since Nate is, as he says, a little broke. Lesje hasn't offered to pay the hotel bill herself. Once, long ago, her women's group might have sneered at this reluctance, but there is a limit.

Lesje doesn't feel tacky. She isn't sure whether Nate does or not. He's sitting in one of the chairs (there are two, both cheap Danish Modern with frayed corners, to match the blue frayed bedspread which is as yet undisturbed), telling her how terrible he feels that they have to be in this hotel instead of somewhere else. The somewhere his tone implies is not another, more acceptable hotel. It's a summer field, a deserted sunwarmed beach, a wooded knoll with breezes.

Lesje doesn't mind the hotel, even though the hum from the air conditioner is beginning to get to her. It's spewing out thick hot air which smells of upholstery and cigar butts, and they haven't been able to find the switch that turns it off. If this hotel had been a choice, she'd feel differently about it, but it's a necessity. They can't go to Lesje's apartment because of William, who was out when Lesje left but who may reappear at any moment, to find the note Lesje has thoughtfully propped on the card table: *Back at 6:00*. They can't go to Nate's, ever, unless Lesje takes time off work during the week. She works the same hours Elizabeth does, though Elizabeth probably has

MARGARET ATWOOD is the author of seven books of poems, three earlier novels, and a critique of Canadian fiction, Survival. Her new novel, Life Before Man, from which this selection is taken, will be published in the U.S. in February by Simon & Schuster.

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more flexibility. But today is Saturday and Elizabeth is at home. Not to mention the children. Nate hasn't mentioned the children, but even so he's managed to convey to Lesje that although he respects her, admires her and desires her, to his children she represents an evil from which he must protect them.

Hence this afternoon hotel. They've come to it by subway, since neither of them owns a car. This fact also rules out necking on side streets, which is what they should be doing at this preliminary stage, in Lesje's opinion. They have in fact necked on side streets, but it's been uncomfortable: feet freezing in slush, passing cars splattering them with brown sludge, arms hugging the bolster shapes of each others' winter coats. But no groping in the front seat.

Lesje considers groping in the front seat almost an essential. The only other affairs she's had have been with William, champion proper, and before him a geologist in second-year university who even then, in 1970, had a crew cut. Neither of these affairs was exactly romantic; both had been based on mutual interests, of a sort. It was hard for Lesje to find men who were as monomaniacal about their subjects as she was about hers. They existed, but they tended to go out with Home Economics types. After a day of pondering surds and pingoes they wanted to put their feet up and eat grated carrot and marshmallow salads. They didn't want to talk about *Megalosaurus tibias* or whether the Pterosaurs had three-chambered or four-chambered hearts, which was what she wanted to talk about. The geologist had been fine; they could compromise on rock strata. They went on hikes with their little picks and kits, and chipped samples off cliffs; then they ate jelly sandwiches and copulated in a friendly way behind clumps of goldenrod and thistles. She found this pleasurable but not extremely so. She still has a collection of rock chips left over from this relationship; looking at it does not fill her with bitterness. He was a nice boy but she wasn't in love with him. She is not exactly a paradigm of modish chic, she knows that, but she could never quite fall in love with a man who says "wow."

As for William, what they have in common is an interest in extinction. She confines it to dinosaurs, however. William applies it to everything. Except cockroaches; a cockroach has been found living in a nuclear reactor. The next age, according to William, will be the age of the insects. On most days he's quite cheerful about this.

Lesje isn't sure what she means by *in love*. Once she thought she was in love with William, since it upset her that he did not ask her to marry him. But recently she's begun to question this. At first she welcomed the relative simplicity, even the bareness, of their life together. They were both committed to their jobs, and they had, it seemed, easily met expectations and only minor areas of friction. But Nate has changed things, he has changed William. What was once a wholesome absence of complications is now an embarrassing lack of complexity. For instance, William would have lunged as soon as they were inside the door. Not so Nate.

They sit on either side of the large double bed which looms like fate in the center of the room, each with a cigarette, drinking out of the hotel glasses which contain

Scotch from Nate's pocket flask mixed with tap water. Gazing across the bed as if it's a fathomless gulf, while Nate apologizes, Lesje listens, veiling her face with her hand, smoke making her squint. Nate doesn't want just an affair, he says. Lesje is touched by this; she doesn't think to ask what he does want. William has never been at such pains to explain himself.

Lesje feels that something momentous is about to take place. Her life is about to change: things will not be as they have been before. The walls of the hotel, patterned with greenish lozenges, are dissolving, she is moving through the open air, no longer snow-filled and tinged with exhaust fumes but clean and sunny; on the horizon there's the glimmer of water. Why then doesn't Nate stub out his cigarette, stand up, take her in his arms? Now that he has her in this tacky bedroom.

But instead he pours himself another drink and continues to explain. He wants everything to be clear at the beginning. He doesn't want Lesje to think she's breaking up a marriage. As she no doubt knows, Elizabeth has had other lovers, the most recent of whom was Chris. Elizabeth has never made any secret of that. She thinks of Nate as the father of her children but not as her husband. They haven't lived together, he means slept together, for several years, he isn't sure how many. They've stayed in the same house together because of the children. Neither of them can stand the thought of living apart from the children. So naturally Elizabeth will have no objection to his doing what Lesje wishes he would hurry up and do.

The mention of Elizabeth startles Lesje, who realizes that she hasn't been thinking about her at all. She ought to be thinking about her. You don't just stroll into another woman's life and take over her husband. Everyone in the women's group agreed, in theory at least, on the reprehensibility of such behavior, although they also agreed that married people should not be viewed as each other's property but as living, growing organisms. What it boiled down to was that manstealing was out but personal growth was commendable. You had to have the right attitude and be honest with yourself. These convolutions had discouraged Lesje; she hadn't understood why so much time was being spent on them. But at that point she'd never been in such a situation, and now she is.

She certainly doesn't want to play Other Woman in some conventional, boring triangle. She doesn't feel like an other woman; she isn't wheedling or devious, she doesn't wear negligees or paint her toenails. William may think she's exotic, but she isn't really; she's straightforward, narrow and unadorned, a scientist; not a web-spinner, expert at the entrapment of husbands. But Nate no longer seems like Elizabeth's husband. His family is surely external to him; in himself he's single, a free agent. And Elizabeth is therefore not the wife of Nate, she isn't a wife at all. Instead she's a widow, Chris's widow if anyone's, moving unpaired and grieving down an autumn avenue, leaves from the over-arching trees falling on her faintly disheveled hair. Lesje consigns her to this mournfully romantic picture, frames her, and then forgets about her.

William is another matter. William will mind; he will definitely mind in one way or another. But Lesje doesn't

intend to tell him about this, at least not yet. Nate has implied that although Elizabeth would give the seal of approval to what he's doing and may even be pleased for him, since in a way they are good friends, now is not the right time to tell her. Elizabeth has been making an adjustment, not as quick an adjustment as he'd like to see but definitely an adjustment. He wants her to finish doing that before he gives her something new that she has to adjust to. It has something to do with the children.

So if Nate is going to protect Elizabeth and the children from Lesje, Lesje is entitled to protect William from Nate. She feels tender towards William when she considers his need for protection. He's never needed it before. But now she reflects upon the unconscious nape of his neck, the vulnerability of the hollow at the angle of his collarbone, his jugular vein, so perilously close to the skin, his inability to tan instead of burn, the wax in his ears unseen by him, his childlike pomposity. She has no desire to hurt William.

Nate puts down his glass, grinds his cigarette into the hotel ashtray. He's come to the end of ethics. He negotiates the perimeter of the blue bed, walks to Lesje, kneels in front of her where she sits in her Danish Modern chair. He takes her hand away from her mouth, kisses her. She has never been touched with such gentleness. William's style has a lot of adolescent roughhouse, she now realizes, and the geologist was always in a hurry. Nate isn't in a hurry. They've been here two hours and she still has all her clothes on.

He picks her up, places her on the bed, lies down beside her. He kisses her again, tentatively, lingeringly. Then he asks what time it is. He himself has no watch. Lesje tells him it's five-thirty. He sits up. Lesje is beginning to feel slightly unattractive. Are her teeth too large, is that it?

"I have to phone home," he says. "I'm supposed to be taking the kids to dinner at my mother's."

He lifts the telephone from the table and dials. The cord trails across Lesje's chest. "Hello, love," he says, and Lesje knows it's Elizabeth. "Just checking in. I'll pick them up at six, okay?"

The words "home," "love," and "mother" have disturbed Lesje. A vacuum forms around her heart, spreads; it's as if she doesn't exist. When Nate puts down the phone, she begins to cry. He folds his arms around her, soothing her, smoothing her hair. "There's lots of time, love," he says. "Next time will be better."

Don't call me that, she wants to say. She sits on the bed, feet over the side, hands dangling from her wrists, while Nate gets their coats, puts his own on, holds hers out for her. She wants to be the one going to dinner with him. To his mother's. She doesn't want to stay here on the blue bed alone, or walk out into the street alone, or go back to her apartment where she will also be alone whether William is there or not. She wants to pull Nate back onto the bed with her. She doesn't believe there is lots of time. There is no time, surely she will never see him again. She doesn't understand why her heart is beating so painfully, gulping for oxygen in the blackness of this outer space. He's taking something away from her. If he loves her, why has she been exiled?

Saturday, January 15, 1977

NATE

Jackass, Nate whispers. Ninny. Fraud. He's reading the editorial in the *Globe & Mail*, and he usually says such things while doing this, but right now he means himself. *Idiot*.

He sees himself hunched forward on the hotel room chair, raving about his scruples while Lesje sits across the room from him, unattainable, shining like a crescent moon. He doesn't know why he didn't want to, couldn't. He was afraid. He doesn't want to hurt her, that's it. But she was hurt anyway. Why did she cry?

His hands are still shaking. Luckily there's a drink left in his pocket flask. He slides it out from beneath his sweater, gulps quickly, then lights a cigarette to hide the smell. His mother, virtuous woman, does not drink. She doesn't smoke either, but Nate knows which is lower on her point system of moral crimes. Sometimes she buys beer for him but she draws the line at spirits. Poisoning the system.

The children are out in the tiny kitchen with her, sitting up on the counter, watching her mash the potatoes. She does this by hand; she doesn't have an electric mixer. She beats eggs by hand, whips cream by hand. One of his earliest memories of his mother is of her elbow, whirling around like a strange fleshy wind machine. Her television set is black and white and even more primitive than his. She wears aprons, printed ones with bibs.

From the cellar below him the pathos of his childhood rises to engulf him: down there are his baseball glove, the leather cracked, three pairs of outgrown running shoes, his skates, his goalie pads, carefully embalmed in trunks. Though she gives away almost everything else, his mother keeps these objects as if they're relics, as if he's already dead. In fairness Nate has to admit that if she hadn't, he might have kept them himself. The goalie pads, anyway.

He's read that goalies get ulcers; it figures. He wasn't heavy enough to play anything else, he didn't have the weight to check. He remembers the anxiety, everyone expecting him to hurl himself in front of a frozen rubber bullet traveling at the speed of light; the despair when he missed. But he loved it. It was pure: you won or you lost and it was obvious which. When he said this to Elizabeth she thought it was childish. Her own concepts of winning and losing are greyer and more snarled. Is this because she's female? But his children understand it, so far; Nancy, anyway.

He can see the children over the top of his *Globe & Mail*, their small heads framed by his mother's red-starred map of the world-wide civil-rights violations. Beside it there's a new poster which reads: ONE FLASH AND YOU'RE ASH. His mother has added the abolition of nuclear energy to her long list of crusades. Oddly enough,

it's not a trip she lays on the children. Nor does she tell them to eat up their dinners because of the starving children in Europe, or Asia, or India. (Himself, guiltily stuffing down bread crusts under his mother's blue benevolent gaze.) She doesn't ask if they are saving their allowances for the Bandage Campaign. She doesn't drag them through services at the Unitarian Church, with its non-committal interior and its idealistic hymns about the Brotherhood of Man and its icon of a small black boy beside a trash can where most churches have God. The last time they had dinner with his mother, Nate almost choked on his turnips when Nancy began to tell a Newfie joke. But his mother actually laughed. She lets the children tell all kinds of jokes to her: moron jokes, Moby Dick jokes, and many more of dubious taste. "What's blue and covered with cookies and flies? A dead Girl Guide."

Nate would have been told it wasn't nice to make fun of morons or whales or Girl Guides: all were worthy. Much less Newfies. Is it because Nancy and Janet are girls and therefore not expected to reach the level of high seriousness that was and still is expected of him? Or is it merely because his mother is now a grandmother and these are her grandchildren? In any case, she spoils them rotten. She even gives them candy. Although he loves her for it, Nate finds himself resenting it. He can hear his mother laughing now, above the sound of the potato masher. He wishes she'd laughed more with him.

She smiled though. She was raised a Quaker, and Quakers, from what he'd seen of them, were smilers rather than laughers. Nate isn't sure why she switched to the Unitarians. He's heard Unitarianism called a featherbed for falling Christians, but his mother doesn't seem like a woman who has fallen anywhere. (Where is the featherbed for falling Unitarians? he wonders. Such as himself.)

He tries not to discuss theology with his mother. She still believes that goodness will win.

She's always used the war as an example, virtue triumphant, despite the fact that it killed his father. He can't remember whether it was before or after this death that she took up part-time nursing at the veterans' hospital where she still works, the legless and armless men that were young when she started there aging along with her, becoming, she tells him, more and more bitter, fading one by one, dying. She should leave such a depressing job, get something more cheerful; he's advised her to do that. But "Everyone else has forgotten them," she says, looking at him reproachfully. "Why should I?" For some reason her pious sacrifices infuriate him. Why shouldn't you, you're human? Nate has wanted to reply. But never has.

His father, no amputee but a simple dead man, smiles down at him now from the mantelpiece, a young face framed by the severe lines of a uniform. Violator of his mother's pacifist ideals, nevertheless a hero. It had taken Nate a long time to find out exactly how his father had died. "He was a hero," was all that his mother would say, leaving him with visions of rescues on the beach, his father wiping out enemy machine-gun nests single-handed or floating like a dark bat over some blacked-out town, his parachute billowing like a cape behind him.

Finally, on his sixteenth birthday, he'd asked again

and this time—convinced perhaps that he was ready for the facts of life—she'd told him. His father had died in England, of hepatitis, without ever reaching the real war.

"I thought you said he was a hero," he'd said, disgusted.

His mother's eyes grew round and bluer. "But Nathanael. He *was*."

Still and all, he wishes he'd known sooner; he would have felt less overshadowed. It's hard to compete with any dead man, he knows, much less a hero.

"Dinner, Nate," his mother calls. She enters carrying the potatoes, the girls follow with knives and forks, and they all crowd around the diminutive oval table at one end of his mother's living room. Nate has asked earlier if there was anything he could do, but since he got married his mother has banished him to the living room during meal-time preparations. She won't even let him wash the dishes any more.

They're the same dishes, beige with orange nasturtiums, he used to wash so endlessly, grudgingly. They depress Elizabeth, which is one of the reasons she almost never participates in these visits. Elizabeth says his mother's things invariably look as if she ordered them out of a stamp catalogue, and there's some truth to this. Everything in his mother's house is serviceable and, he has to admit, rather ugly. Her table has a plastic finish, her chairs are wipeable, her dishes garish, her glassware will bounce on the floor. She doesn't have the time for frills, she says, or the money either. Another thing that bothers her about the wooden toys he makes is the price. "Only rich people can afford them, Nate," she says accusingly.

They eat hamburger patties fried in leftover bacon fat, mashed potatoes, and canned beets with margarine, while Nate's mother asks the children about school and laughs gaily at their terrible jokes. Nate feels his stomach go cold; the canned beets sink, mix uneasily with his furtive Scotch. They are, all three of them, so unsuspecting, so innocent. It's as if he's looking at them through a lighted window: inside, peace and tranquil domesticity, this house, the tastes, the smells even, so familiar to him. Good, unassuming. And outside, darkness, thunder, the storm, himself a wolflike monster in tattered clothes, fingernails ragged, lurking red-eyed and envious, snout pressed to the glass. He alone knows the darkness of the human heart, the secrets of evil. *Kaboom*.

"Ninny," he whispers to himself.

"What did you say, dear?" his mother asks, turning her bright blue eyes full upon him. Older now, with crinkles behind spectacles, but the same eyes, shining, earnest, always on the verge of some emotion he cannot quite face: disappointment, joy. The perpetual spotlight in which he's always lived, alone on the stage, the star performer.

"I was talking to myself," he says.

"Oh," his mother laughs, "I do that all the time. You must have inherited it."

After dessert, which is canned peaches, the three of them wash the dishes and Nate is again exiled to the living room to do whatever it is that men are supposed to do after dinner. Nate wonders whether, if his father had lived, his mother would have gone in for Women's Liberation. As it

is she doesn't have to. She does, of course, on the theoretical level, and she's fond of pointing out the almost innumerable ways in which women's basic human rights have been cropped, stunted, mutilated and destroyed by men. But if he had slippers she'd bring them for him.

He'll phone Lesje, see her again. He won't see her again. He's a horse's ass, he's made a mess of it, she won't want to see him again. He has to see her again. He's in love with her, with that cool thin body, the face turned in upon itself in statue-like contemplation. She sits behind a lighted window, draped in soft white, playing the spinet, her moving fingers luminous against the keys. Growling, he leaps through the glass.

Saturday, January 15, 1977

ELIZABETH

Elizabeth is sitting at the small desk in her bedroom (maple c. 1875). It has a matching chair which she bought at the same auction. It's a wonder to her how the ladies of that time ever managed to get their great cabbage padded buttocks onto the chairs made for that purpose. You were supposed to perch gracefully, skirts falling, fake ass billowing around your hidden real ass. No visible support. The apparition of a cloud.

In this desk Elizabeth keeps: her check book and canceled checks, her bills, her budget, her lists of things needing to be done around the house (one list for urgent, another for long-term), her personal letters, and the journal she started four years ago but has failed to keep up. This desk has not been opened since Chris's death.

She can now think *Chris's death*. She almost never thinks *Chris's suicide*. This would imply that Chris's death was something he did to himself; she thinks of it, on the contrary, as something he did to her. He's not feeling the effects of it, whereas she still is. For instance, she has not opened the desk until now because in the upper left-hand pigeonhole, held together tidily by an elastic band, is the bundle of letters he was sending her in September and October; all on lined notebook paper in ballpoint pen, the handwriting becoming larger and more spidery until finally, on October 15, there had been just two words filling an entire page. She should not have kept these letters, she knows; she should throw them out now, immediately, without looking at them again. But she's always been a saver.

She avoids looking at the letters as she bends over her checkbook. Now that she's into it, she's even getting a certain amount of pleasure out of it. Order from chaos, all those unpaid bills cleared out of the way, entered into her book. Nate has paid a few things that had to be paid—the phone bill, the hydro—but everything else has been waiting for her, sometimes with two or three politely outraged letters, requesting and then demanding. She likes to have

her accounts settled, to owe nothing to anyone. She likes to know she has money in the bank. She intends always to have enough money for an emergency.

Unlike her mother, who'd sat crying for two days in the flowered chair by the window after their father was suddenly not there any more. "What am I supposed to do?" she asked the air, as if there was somebody listening who had a standard of behavior all ready for her. Her sister Caroline crawling up to her mother's lap, crying too, sliding off repeatedly, crawling back up her mother's slippery-skirted legs like some demented beetle.

Elizabeth had not wept or crawled. When it became obvious that their mother was not going to get up out of the chair and fix them dinner, she'd counted the quarters she'd been saving, the ones Uncle Teddy had been slipping down the front of her dress on their infrequent visits to Auntie Muriel's big house. She'd gone through her mother's purse, throwing the lipstick tubes and crumpled hankies onto the floor, finding nothing but a wrinkled two-dollar bill and some pennies. Then she'd let herself out of the apartment, using the keys from her mother's purse to lock the door behind her. She'd gone to the little grocery store three blocks away and bought some bread and cheese and marched back carrying the brown paper bag, stamping her rubber boots hard on the stairs as she climbed up. This was no great feat, she'd done similar things often enough before. "Eat this," she'd said to her mother, furious with her and with her sister. "Eat this and stop crying!"

It hadn't worked. Her mother had sniveled on, and Elizabeth had sat in the kitchen, chewing on her bread and cheese, in a white rage. She wasn't angry with her father. She'd always suspected he couldn't be depended on. She was angry with her mother for not having known it.

It was Auntie Muriel who had taught her how to keep a bank account, how to balance a checkbook, what *interest* was. Although Auntie Muriel regarded most books as frivolous trash and even schoolwork as of marginal value, she'd spent a good deal of time on this part of Elizabeth's education. For which Elizabeth is grateful. Money counts, Auntie Muriel used to say—still says, when anyone will listen—and Elizabeth knows it's true. If only because Auntie Muriel enforced the lesson so strongly: she supported Elizabeth, paid for her well-made underwear and her blue tweed coats and her piano lessons, therefore she owned her.

Auntie Muriel's attitude towards Elizabeth was equivocal. Elizabeth's mother was no good, therefore Elizabeth herself was probably no good. But Elizabeth was Auntie Muriel's niece, so there must be something to her. Auntie Muriel worked at developing those parts of Elizabeth that most resembled Auntie Muriel and suppressing or punishing the other parts. Auntie Muriel admired backbone, and Elizabeth feels that, underneath everything, she herself now has the backbone of a rhinoceros.

Auntie Muriel is unambiguous about most things. Her few moments of hesitation have to do with the members of her own family. She isn't sure where they fit into the

Great Chain of Being. She's quite certain of her own place, however. First comes God. Then comes Auntie Muriel and the Queen, with Auntie Muriel having a slight edge. Then come about five members of the Timothy Eaton Memorial Church, which Auntie Muriel attends. After this there is a large gap. Then white, non-Jewish Canadians, Englishmen, and white, non-Jewish Americans, in that order. Then there's another large gap, followed by all other human beings on a descending scale, graded according to skin color and religion. Then cockroaches, clothes moths, silverfish and germs, which are about the only forms of animal life with which Auntie Muriel has ever had any contact. Then all sexual organs, except those of flowers.

This is how Elizabeth puts it for the amusement of others when she's telling Auntie Muriel stories; notably to Philip Burroughs of Greek and Roman, whose aunt is Janie Burroughs, who travels in the same wee circle as Auntie Muriel. Unlike Nate, Philip can be depended on to know what she's talking about.

Auntie Muriel may be a droll story, but this doesn't affect her malignance. She's a purist as well as a puritan. There are no shades of grey for Auntie Muriel. Her only visible moral dilemma is that she feels she ought to rank her family with the Timothy Eaton Church members, because of their relation to her; but she feels compelled to place them instead with the cockroaches and silverfish, because of their deplorable behavior.

Such as that of Elizabeth's mother, which even now Auntie Muriel never fails to allude to. Elizabeth has never been sure why her mother vanished. Helplessness, perhaps; an inability to imagine what else to do. Auntie Muriel's version is that Elizabeth's mother deserted the family out of innate depravity—ran off with the son of her own father's lawyer, which Auntie Muriel saw as a kind of incest and which luckily didn't last long. She, Auntie Muriel, had rescued the deserted children and had begun immediately stuffing them with all the advantages.

Elizabeth, even as a child, did not fully accept this story. Now she thinks it may have been the other way around, that Auntie Muriel stole her and her sister away from their apartment while their mother was out on one of her expeditions, "looking for work," she told them. Then, once Auntie Muriel had the children safely barricaded into her own house, she'd probably told their mother she was unfit and it could be proved in court if necessary. This is more Auntie Muriel's style: self-righteous banditry.

She can remember the actual event but it tells her nothing. Playing movie-star cutouts with Caroline; then Auntie Muriel suddenly there, saying, "Get your coats on, children." Elizabeth had asked where they were going. "To the doctor," said Auntie Muriel, which seemed plausible.

Caroline at the third-floor window. *That's Mother. Where?* Down below on the sidewalk, her face upturned in the streetlight, a light blue coat, May flies fluttering around her. Opening the window, smell of new leaves. Calling, *Mummy, Mummy*, both of them. Auntie Muriel's footsteps on the stairs, along the hall. What are you yelling about?

That's not your mother. Now close the window or the whole neighborhood will hear. The woman turning, walking away, head sadly down. Caroline screaming through the closed window, Auntie Muriel prying her fingers from the ledge, the catch.

For months Elizabeth put herself to sleep with a scene from *The Wizard of Oz*. The book itself had been left behind, it was part of the old life before Auntie Muriel's, but she could remember it. It was the part where Dorothy throws a bucket of water over the Wicked Witch of the West and melts her. Auntie Muriel was the Witch, of course. Elizabeth's mother was Glinda the Good. One day she would reappear and kneel down to kiss Elizabeth on the forehead.

She leans back, closes her eyes. Dry eyes. Chris wanted her to quit her job, leave her home and her two children. For him. Throw herself on his mercy. His tender mercy. She'd have to be crazy, he'd have to be crazy to think she ever would. No visible support. He should have left things the way they were.

She sits up, reaches quickly for the bundle of letters, reads the one on the top. FUCK OFF. His last message. She'd been angry when she first read that.

She tucks the check stubs and paid bills and the duplicate rent receipts from the tenants upstairs into an envelope, marks it: 1976. That finishes off the year. Now she can start another one. Time hasn't stood still while she's been away, as she now thinks of it. She's barely managed to hold things together at the office, but she has a lot to catch up on. The quilt exhibit, for instance, must be scheduled and promoted. The girls need new underwear and Nancy needs new snowboots: she's been coming home for days with a wet foot. And there's something wrong with Nate. Something is happening in his life; he hasn't told her about it. Perhaps he has a new lady friend, now that Martha has been used up. He's always told her before, though. She riffles back through the days, looking for clues; at the base of her skull the old chill begins, the old fear, of events, cataclysms preparing themselves without her, gathering like tidal waves at the other side of the world. Behind her back. Out of control.

She stands up, turns the key in her desk. She has backbone. She has money in the bank, not enough but some. She does not have to depend, she is not a dependent. She is self-supporting.

Wednesday, January 19, 1977

LESJE

Organisms adapt to their environments. Of necessity, most of the time. They also adapt to their own needs,

often with a certain whimsy, you could almost say perversity. Take, for instance, the modified third claw on the hind foot of one of Lesje's favorite dinosaurs, the medium-sized but swift and deadly *Deinonychus*. This third claw does not, like the other two, touch the ground; therefore it was not used for walking or running. Ostrom, the noted authority and discoverer of *Deinonychus*, speculated from its position and its shape (sickle-curved, razor-sharp) that it was used for the sole purpose of disemboweling. *Deinonychus*'s front legs, proportionately longer than those of *Tyrannosaurus* or *Gorgosaurus*, held the prey at a suitable distance; *Deinonychus* then stood on one foot while using the third claw of the other foot to slash open the stomach of the prey. A balancing act; also an eccentric way of coping with life, that is, the capturing and preparation of food. Nothing else even close to *Deinonychus* has yet been unearthed. It is this eccentricity, this uniqueness, this acrobatic gaiety, that appeals to Lesje. A kind of dance.

She has watched this innocent though bloody dance many times from the immunity of her treetop, which today happens to be a conifer. There is nothing in sight at the moment, though; not so much as a Pterosaur. William has frightened everything away. He wanders below her among the bulbous-trunked cycad trees, ill at ease. Something is wrong; this isn't what he's used to. The sun is strange and there are odd smells. He hasn't yet realized he's in a different time.

Not realizing is his adaptation. Lesje is his environment, and his environment has changed.

William also sits at a card table, eating the Betty Crocker Noodles Romanoff Lesje has just dished out for him. She herself doesn't feel like eating right now. He's bombarding her with gloom: pollutants are pouring into the air, over three hundred of them, more than have yet been identified. Sulphuric acid and mercury are falling, metallic mist, acid rain, into the pure lakes of Muskoka and points north. Queasy fish rise, roll over, exposing bellies soon to bloat. If ten times more control is not implemented at once (at once!) the Great Lakes will die. A fifth of the fresh water in the world. And for what? Pantyhose, he says accusingly, fork dripping noodles. Rubber bands, cars, plastic buttons. Lesje nods; she knows, but she's helpless. He's doing it on purpose.

At this very moment, William continues relentlessly, birds are eating worms, and stable, unbreakable PCB's are concentrating in their fatty tissues. Lesje herself has probably been incapacitated for safe child-bearing due to the large quantity of DDT she has already stored in her own fatty tissues. Not to mention the radiation bombardment on her ovaries, which will almost certainly cause her to give birth to a two-headed child or to a lump of flesh the size of a grapefruit, containing hair and a fully developed set of teeth (William cites examples), or to a child with its eyes on one side of its face, like a flounder.

Lesje, who does not want to hear much more of this right now, truthful though it may be, counterattacks with the supernova theory *re*: the extinction of the dinosaurs. Eggshells grown so thin the young could not hatch, due to a dramatic increase of cosmic radiation. (This theory is not

in good repute at the Museum, which favors a more gradual hypothesis; nevertheless, it gives William something to think about. It could happen here. Who can tell when a star may explode?) Lesje asks William if he'd like a cup of instant coffee.

William, glumly, says yes. It's this glumness of his, the disappearance of his customary buoyancy, that constitutes the adaptation. Like a dog sniffing the air, he senses the difference in Lesje; he knows, but he doesn't know what he knows. Hence his depression. When Lesje brings in the coffee he says, "You forgot I take cream." His voice is plaintive. Plaintiveness isn't something Lesje associates with William.

Lesje sits down in her easy chair. She wants to ruminate, but if she goes into the bedroom William will take it as an invitation, he'll follow her and want to make love. Lesje doesn't wish to do this right now. (Problem: copulation of *Deinonychus*. Role of the third claw, sickle-shaped, razor-sharp: how kept out of the way? Accidents?) Despite the fact that every cell in her body has grown heavier, is liquid, is massive, is glowing with watery energy, each nucleus throwing out its own light. Collectively she blinks like a firefly; she's a lantern, a musky signal. No wonder William hovers, priapic, anxious because she's twice locked the bathroom door while taking a shower and once told him she had a bad case of heartburn. Awkward William bumbles, June bug against the screen.

But how is it that Nate has failed to appear? He was suppose to phone on the seventeenth; he's two days late. She makes excuses to waft past the phone in case it rings, she stays in when she would otherwise go out, goes out when she can no longer stand it. She should have given him the phone number at work; but he could get her easily through the switchboard if he wanted to. Could it be that he's already phoned, that William has answered and, divining everything, has said something so vicious or threatening that Nate will never phone again? She doesn't dare ask. She doesn't dare phone Nate, either. If Elizabeth answers, he'll be displeased. If one of the children answers he'll also be displeased. If he answers he'll be displeased too because he'll know it could just as well have been one of the others.

Lesje takes refuge in work. Which was once the perfect escape.

Part of her job involves the education of the public on matters pertaining to vertebrate paleontology. Right now the Museum is developing a dinosaur media kit for schools, which will include film strips and taped commentary, as well as booklets, posters and guides to the Museum's exhibits. It's hoped that this kit will be as popular as the sale of the models of *Diplodocus* and *Stegosaurus* (grey plastic, made in Hong Kong) and of the dinosaur coloring book indicate it will. But how much to tell? What for instance, of the family lives of the dinosaurs? What about their methods of egg-laying and—delicate subject, but always of interest—fertilization? Should these be ignored? If not, will the various religious and moralistic parent-action groups now gaining strength object to this material and boycott the kits? Such questions

would not normally have occurred to Lesje, but they have occurred to Dr. Van Vleet, who has asked her to look into them and to propose some solutions.

Lesje closes her eyes, sees before her the articulated skeletons of the Museum exhibits, wired into a grotesque semblance of life. Who could possibly object to a copulation that took place ninety million years ago? The love lives of stones, sex among the ossified. Yet she could see how such gargantuan passions, the earth actually moving, a single nostril filling the screen, sighs of lust like a full-blast factory whistle, might be upsetting to some. She remembers the Grade Four teacher who threw out the toad eggs she'd brought to school. She'd hoped to describe to the class how she'd seen them being laid, in a ditch, the huge female toad gripped by a male so small it looked like a different animal. The teacher listened to this recital *solo*, then said she didn't think the class really needed to know about things like that. As usual Lesje had accepted the adult verdict and watched mutely while the teacher carried her jar of precious toad eggs out of the room to flush them down the girls' toilet.

Why didn't they need to know about things like that, Lesje now wonders? What do they need to know about? Probably not much. Certainly not the questions that occur to her at times of free-ranging speculation. Did dinosaurs have penises, for instance? A good question. Their descendants the birds have cloacal openings, whereas some snakes have not only one penis but two. Did the male dinosaur hold the female dinosaur by the scruff of the neck, like a rooster? Did dinosaurs herd, did they mate for life like geese, did they have harems, did male dinosaurs fight each other at mating season? Perhaps that would help to explain the modified third claw on *Deinonychus*. Lesje decides not to raise these questions. Dinosaurs laid eggs, like turtles, and that will be that.

William says he's still hungry and is going into the kitchen to make himself a sandwich. This is an expression of dissatisfaction with Lesje's ability to meet his requirements: Lesje knows it but doesn't care. Ordinarily she would make the sandwich for him, since William has always claimed to be one big thumb in the kitchen. He will manage to break something out there or cut his finger on a sardine can (William, foe of cans, nevertheless has a periodic hankering for sardines that must be catered to). There will be wreckage and carnage, wounds, mutterings and curses; William will emerge with a tatty sandwich, blood-smeared uneven bread, sardine oil on his shirt. He will display himself, he'll wish to be appeased, and Lesje, she knows, will do this. In the absence of Nate, who has offered, when she comes to think of it, nothing at all. A wide plain. A risk.

The phone rings and William gets to it before Lesje is even out of her chair. "It's for you," he says.

Lesje, chest gripped by a fit of shallow breathing, seizes the phone. "Hello," says a woman's voice. "This is Elizabeth Schoenhof."

Lesje's throat closes. She's been found out. Grandmothers converge on her, holding out her guilt, their grief.

But far from it. Elizabeth is merely inviting her to dinner. Her and William, of course. Nate and Elizabeth,

says Elizabeth, would both be very happy if they could come.

Friday, January 21, 1977

ELIZABETH

Elizabeth is having lunch with Martha in the orange cafeteria of the Museum. They're both eating sparingly: soup, fruit yogurt, tea. Elizabeth has insisted on paying. Martha has not fought her for half of the bill as she once would have. It's a sign of her defeat.

So is the fact that they're eating here at all. The Museum cafeteria is nothing special. Once, in the days of Martha's ascendancy, when Elizabeth thought she might be a real threat, she'd gone to considerable trouble to make sure they met for these lunches in good restaurants, where Elizabeth could demonstrate her own knowledge of the superior menu and get Martha slightly bombed on cocktails and wine. Martha doesn't hold her liquor very well and Elizabeth had found this useful. She would sip delicately at the edge of her own wine glass while Martha downed the carafe, priming herself and finally spewing out a lot more than she should have about Nate's activities and imperfections. Every time Martha said something unflattering about Nate, Elizabeth would nod and murmur agreement, even though these criticisms irritated her, reflecting as they did on her taste in husbands; and Martha's eyes would dampen with gratitude. Not that Martha likes her. Neither of them has any illusions about that. Soon she will not have to take Martha to lunch at all; coffee will be sufficient. After that, she will have dentist's appointments. Lots of them.

Elizabeth has removed the dishes from her tray and set them out on an unfolded napkin, but Martha has no time today for such niceties. She eats from the tray, slurping her soup, her square face bunched into a scowl. Her dark hair is stringy, pulled back and clamped to her scalp with a tortoise-shell plastic clip. She looks brownish, pinched; hardly the confident peasant, hearty and wide-chested, that Elizabeth had first found herself having to deal with. She's here to complain about Nate, as if Nate has broken a window with a baseball and Elizabeth is his mother.

"I hit him," Martha is saying, "right between the eyes. I guess I shouldn't have, but it felt good. He's a prick, you know. Underneath all that *understanding* stuff. I don't know how you can live with him."

Once Elizabeth would have agreed; now, however, she can allow herself a few luxuries. Poor Nate, she thinks. He's such an innocent. "He's a sensational father," she says. "You couldn't ask for a better one. The girls adore him."

"I wouldn't know," says Martha. She bites savagely into her cracker; brittle flakes sprinkle the tray. No class,

Elizabeth thinks; she never did have any. Elizabeth has always known that sooner or later Martha would overplay her hand. She herself tries for understatement. She opens her peach yogurt and stirs the contents up from the bottom.

"I never understood at first why you were so nice to me," Martha says, with a little of her old belligerence. "Taking me out to lunch and so forth. I couldn't see it. I mean, if I was you I wouldn't have done that."

"I believe in being civilized about these things," Elizabeth says.

"But then I figured it out. You wanted to *supervise* us. Like some kind of playground organizer. Make sure it didn't go too far. Right? You can admit it now it's all over."

Elizabeth frowns slightly. She doesn't like this interpretation of her motives, though it may be just slightly accurate. "I hardly think that's fair, Martha," she says. Behind Martha, something of more interest is taking place. Lesje Green has come in with the Curator of Vertebrate Paleontology, Dr. Van Vleet. They're going along the counter now, filling their trays. They often have lunch together; everyone knows there's nothing to it, since Dr. Van Vleet is about ninety and Lesje is known to be living with a young man who works at the Ministry of the Environment. They have lunch together presumably because they can't find anyone else to talk to about the old rocks and bones they're both so stuck on.

Elizabeth has always found Lesje hard to deal with: strange, sometimes pedantic, skittish. Too specialized. Today, however, she follows her with more than usual interest. The tipoff, now that she's thought about it, was that visit to the Museum back in November. The children told her about the dinosaur lady who showed them around, but Nate hadn't mentioned her. He'd asked Elizabeth to go with them, which didn't fit; but Nate is such a bungler it's the kind of thing he would do. Increasingly he has that mooning look; he's rubbing against the furniture. She's almost certain she's right, and tomorrow evening she'll know.

"We were supposed to be having these heart-to-hearts," Martha is saying, "but we never did, really, did we? I mean, we'd both say a lot about *him*, but I never said what I thought about you and you never said what you thought about me. We were never really honest, isn't that right?"

Martha is itching for honesty right now, she'd like a shouting match, right here in the cafeteria. Elizabeth wishes Nate had picked a ladyfriend with more sense of style. But a legal secretary at a two-bit lawyer's office, what could you expect? Elizabeth herself has no time for honesty right now. She doesn't think it would serve any purpose to tell Martha her real opinions, and she already knows what Martha thinks about her.

But in any contest she knows she would win. Martha has only one vocabulary, the one she uses; but Elizabeth has two. The genteel chic she's acquired, which is a veneer but a useful one: insinuating, flexible, accommodating. And another language altogether, older, harder, left over from those streets and schoolyards on the far edge of gentility where she fought it out after each one of her parents' quick decampments.

These fast moves were done at night, to avoid witnesses and landlords. Elizabeth would fall asleep on a pile of her mother's unpacked dresses, beautiful frail dresses, left over from some earlier times, and wake up knowing she would have to go out into the strange faces, the ritual tests. If anyone pushed her she pushed back twice as hard, and if anyone pushed Caroline she put her head down and charged, right in the pit of the stomach. She could get big kids that way, even boys. They never expected it from someone that short. Sometimes she lost, but not often. She lost when there were more than two against her.

"You're turning into a hooligan," her mother said in one of her spasms of self-pity, dabbing at blood. In those days Elizabeth was always bleeding. Not that there was anything her mother could do about it; or about much else. Elizabeth's grandfather helped out while he was alive, though he said her father was a rounder, but Auntie Muriel got hold of him in the last months of his life and he changed his will. That's what Elizabeth's mother said, after the funeral.

Then they moved again, to an even smaller apartment, and her mother wandered helplessly around the cramped living room carrying things, a teapot, a stocking, which she didn't know where to set down. "It's not what I'm used to," she said. She went to bed with a headache; this time there was a bed. Elizabeth's father came home with two other men and told her a joke: What did the chickens say when their mother laid an orange? No one put Elizabeth to bed, but no one usually did. Sometimes her father pretended to, but it was only an excuse to fall asleep across her bed with all his clothes on. Her mother got up again and they all sat around in the living room drinking. Elizabeth was used to this. In her nightgown she sat on one of the men's laps, his bristly skin against her cheek. He called her "baby." Her mother got up to go to the little girls' room, she said, and tripped over her father's foot. He put it there on purpose: he liked practical jokes. "Most beautiful woman in the world," he said, laughing, picking her up from the linoleum whose pattern of maroon and yellow tapestry flowers Elizabeth can see whenever she wants to. He gave her a loose kiss on the cheek, winking; the other men laughed. Elizabeth's mother started to cry, her thin hands covering the porcelain face.

"You're a turd," Elizabeth said to her father. The other men laughed even more at this.

"You don't mean it, your poor old dad," he said. He tickled her under the armpits. The next morning he was gone. It was after this that space became discontinuous.

Almost no one knows any of this about Elizabeth. They don't know she's a refugee, with a refugee's desperate habits. Nate knows a little of it. Chris knew it, finally. Martha doesn't, neither does Lesje, and this gives Elizabeth a large advantage. She knows there's nothing in her that will compel her to behave decently. She can speak from that other life if she has to. If pushed she'll stop at nothing. Or, put another way: when she reaches nothing she will stop.

Two tables away, Lesje walks towards them, her tray listing badly, that other-wordly expression on her face which probably means she's thinking obscure thoughts but which reminds Elizabeth of someone having a minor epileptic fit. She sits down, almost knocking over her coffee cup with one of those gawky elbows. Elizabeth quickly appraises her clothes: jeans again. Lesje can get away with it, she's skinny enough. Also she's only a curatorial assistant. Elizabeth herself must dress more responsibly.

"Excuse me, Martha," she says. "There's someone I have to speak to." Martha, balked, rips the tin-foil from her yogurt cup.

Elizabeth walks softly, puts her hand on Lesje's checkered shoulder, says "Lesje."

Lesje shrieks and drops her spoon on the table. "Oh," she says, turning.

"Can't come up behind her," says Dr. Van Vleet. "Learned that a long time ago. Trial and error."

"I'm so sorry," Elizabeth says. "I just wanted to say how pleased we both are that you'll be able to make it tomorrow."

Lesje nods, finally manages to say, "So am I, I mean, we both are." Elizabeth smiles graciously at Dr. Van Vleet and pauses beside Martha just long enough to say how pleasant it has been to see her again and she hopes they can get together soon; she's sorry, but she has to get back to the office now.

She feels very calm. She will manage.

She works in her office all afternoon, dictating memos and filling out request forms and typing a few special letters that need more thought. They've given a definite yes to the Chinese Peasant Art exhibit, which will now need some groundwork; but China is good copy these days and the show should be easy to promote.

Just before closing time she covers her typewriter and gathers her purse and coat. There's one more project she's promised herself she will take care of today.

She goes up the stairs, through the wooden door that keeps out the public, along the corridor with the metal drawers on either side. Chris's workroom. Another man works here now. He looks up from the table as Elizabeth comes towards him. Small, balding, not at all like Chris.

"Can I help you?" he says.

"I'm Elizabeth Schoenhof," Elizabeth says. "I work in Special Projects. I was wondering if you had a few spare scraps of fur. Any kind will do. My children use them for dolls' dresses."

The man smiles and gets up to look. Elizabeth has been told his name but she's forgotten it: Nagle? She will look it up. It's part of her job to know the technicians in every department, in case she needs to use them for anything.

As he rummages among the clutter on the shelves behind his table, Elizabeth looks around. The room has changed, been rearranged. Time has not stood still, nothing here is frozen. Chris is definitely gone. She cannot bring him back, and for the first time she no longer wants to. He'll punish her for that thought later, no doubt, but at the moment she's clear of him.

She walks slowly down the marble stairs, fingering a handful of fur. Scraps. All that's left of Chris, whom she can no longer remember whole. At the door she stuffs the bundle into her purse, then takes the subway up to St. George and along to Castle Frank. She walks along the viaduct till she's roughly in the middle, over the snow-filled ravine and the rushing cars below. Like Auntie Muriel, she needs her burial rituals. She opens her purse and throws the fur scraps one by one into space.

Saturday, January 22, 1977

LESJE

Lesje is sitting in Elizabeth's living room, balancing a small cup of what she supposes is excellent coffee on her left knee. In her right hand she's holding a liqueur glass half-full of Benedictine and brandy. She doesn't know how she's ended up with two containers of liquid and no place to put them. She's positive she will very soon spill at least one and probably both of them onto Elizabeth's mushroom-colored carpet. She's desperate to get away.

But the others are all playing a game that substitutes the word "moose" for any other word in the title of a Canadian novel. It has to be Canadian. This apparently is part of the joke.

"As for Me and My Moose," Elizabeth says, and everyone else in the room chuckles.

"A Jest of Moose," says the wife of the man from Greek and Roman who works at the CBC.

"A Moose of God," replies the man, whose name is Philip. Nobody call him Phil. Elizabeth laughs and asks Lesje if she'll have some more B & B.

"I'm fine," Lesje says, hoping she has murmured, fearing she's blurted. She needs a cigarette but has no free hand. She doesn't read novels and she hasn't recognized a single one of the titles the others, even Nate, even, sometimes, William, have been batting around so easily. *The Lost Moose*, she could say. But that isn't Canadian.

The whole dinner has been like that. Just a couple of friends, Elizabeth said. Casual. So Lesje wore pants with a long sweater-coat, and the two other women are in dresses. Elizabeth for once is not in black; she's wearing a loose grey chiffon number that makes her look younger and thinner than she does at work. She even has a necklace on, a chain with a silver fish. The other woman is in flowing mauve. Lesje, in her perky, clean-cut stripes, feels about twelve years old.

She's only been able to see Nate once before this evening. In desperation she called his house; one of the children answered. "Just a minute." Abruptly; the slam of the phone hitting the floor. It must have tumbled from the table. A shout. "Dad, it's for you!"

They'd arranged to meet at the coffee shop in the indoor mall at the bottom of Lesje's building. Reckless: what if William?

"Why is she asking us to dinner?" Lesje wanted to

know, by this time frantic. She couldn't back out now, it would look funny. To William as well. And if she'd said no at first it would have looked funny too.

Nate was cautiously holding her hand. "I don't know," he said. "I've given up wondering about her motives. I never know why she does anything."

"We aren't that friendly at work," Lesje said. "Does she know?"

"Probably," Nate said. "She didn't tell me beforehand she was asking you to dinner. I couldn't tell her not to. She often asks people to dinner; or anyway she used to."

"Did you tell her?" It was suddenly the kind of thing he would do.

"Not exactly," Nate said. "I guess I've mentioned you a few times. I'm thinking about you a lot. Maybe she picked up on that. She's pretty sharp."

"But even if she does know, why would she ask me to dinner?" This would be the last thing she herself would do. One of William's old girlfriends, a dental technician, is in the habit of suggesting they all three of them have lunch sometime. Lesje has consistently vetoed this.

"I guess she just wants to take a look at you," Nate said, "Up close. Don't worry, it'll be all right. She won't do anything. You'll enjoy the dinner, she's a great cook when she feels like it."

Not that Lesje could tell. She was so paralyzed by apprehension that she could barely chew. The *boeuf bourguignon* could have been sand as far as she was concerned. Elizabeth graciously ignored the large amount left on Lesje's plate. During the first course she asked Lesje three well-informed questions about power-structures in Vertebrate Paleontology, a truthful answer to any of which might have cost Lesje her job if repeated in the right quarters. Lesje hedged awkwardly, and Elizabeth switched the talk to CBC gossip, with the wife of the man from Greek and Roman supplying.

Elizabeth concentrated on William during dessert. She found his work with the Ministry of the Environment fascinating, and so worthwhile. She supposed she really should make the effort to cart all her old bottles and newspapers to those things, those bins. William, gratified, lectured her on the doom awaiting the world if she should fail to do this, and Elizabeth agreed meekly.

Nate, meanwhile, moved in the background, chain-smoking, drinking steadily but without visible effect, avoiding Lesje's eyes, helping with the plate-clearing and pouring out the wine. Elizabeth directed him unobtrusively: "Love, would you get me a slotted serving spoon?" "Love, could you just turn on the coffee while you're out there?" Lesje sat, nibbling the edges of her meringue, wishing the children were there. At least she would have someone she could talk to without blushing and mumbling and the certainty that at any minute she would open her mouth and some tactless clinker would roll out onto the linen tablecloth. Something about suicides or hotel rooms. But the children had been sent to spend the night with friends. Sometimes, Elizabeth said, much as one loved one's children, one wanted to spend a little free adult time. Nate didn't always agree, she said, directly to Lesje. He was such a doting father. He'd like to be with

his children twenty-four hours a day. "Isn't that true, love?"

Don't call him *love*, Lesje felt like saying. You can't fool me. But she supposed it was a habit. After all, they've been married for ten years.

Which Elizabeth has taken care to emphasize. There have been references all evening to Nate's favorite foods and Nate's favorite wines and Nate's peculiarities of dress. Elizabeth wishes he would get the back of his hair trimmed more often; she used to do it herself with the nail scissors, but she can't get him to hold still long enough any more. Nate's behavior on their wedding day has been mentioned, though not explained; everyone in the room, including the Greek and Roman couple, seems to know this story. Except Lesje and, of course, William, who was in the bathroom at the time. Where Lesje herself at this moment fervently wishes she could be.

William has produced his pipe, an affectation he by and large reserves for company. "I know a better one," he says. "Ever played Startrek?" But nobody has, and the rules, as William starts to expound them, are pronounced too complicated.

"Lifeboat," says the Greek and Roman woman.

Nate asks if anyone would like more B & B. He himself is going to pour himself a Scotch. Would anyone care to join him?

"Sensational," says Elizabeth. She explains that this game is very simple. "We are all in a lifeboat," she says, "and the food is running out. What you have to do is convince everyone else why you should be allowed to remain in the lifeboat instead of being thrown overboard." She says that this game is often very revealing psychologically.

"I sacrifice myself for the good of the group," Nate says promptly.

"Oh," Elizabeth says, giving a mock frown. "He always does that. It's his Quaker upbringing. Really it means he can't be bothered."

"Unitarian," says Nate. "I just think it's an unduly vicious game."

"That's why it's called Lifeboat," Elizabeth says lightly. "All right, Nate's overboard. The sharks have him. Who wants to begin?"

No one does, so Elizabeth tears up a paper napkin and they draw lots.

"Well," says the Greek and Roman man. "I know Morse Code. I can help us get rescued. And I'm good with my hands. When we land on the desert island, I can build the shelter and so forth. I'm a pretty good plumber, too. A tool man." He smiles. "It's nice to have a man around the house."

Elizabeth and the CBC woman, laughing, agree that he should be allowed to stay on the boat.

Elizabeth is next. "I'm a sensational cook," she says. "But more than that, I have a very strong survival instinct. If you try to push me overboard, I'll take at least one of you down with me. How's that? I don't think we should be kicking people out of this boat anyway," she adds. "We should be saving them and eating them. Let's drag Nate back in."

"I'm already miles away," Nate says.

"Elizabeth's using threats," the CBC woman says. "Any of us could use the same ploy; I don't think it should count. But if we're thinking of a long-term plan, I propose that I should be saved instead of Elizabeth. She's almost past child-bearing age and if we want to establish a colony, we'll need babies."

Elizabeth goes white. "I'm sure I could still squeeze a few out," she says.

"Not many," the CBC woman says brightly. "Come on, Liz, it's only a game."

"Lesje?" Elizabeth says. "You walk the plank next."

Lesje opens her mouth, then closes it. She can feel herself blushing. She knows this is not just a game, it's a challenge of some sort. But still, she can't think of a single reason why she should be permitted to remain alive. She isn't a good cook, and besides there's nothing much to cook. She can't build shelters. The CBC woman has used up the babies, and anyway Lesje has a narrow pelvis. What is she good for? None of the things she knows, knows well, is in any way necessary for survival.

They are all looking at her, embarrassed now by the length of time it's taking her, her obvious confusion. "If we find any bones," she says at last, "I'll be able to tell you whose they are." As if the history of bones matters, to anyone but her and a few other addicts. She's attempted a sort of joke, but it's hardly witty repartee. "Excuse me," she says, her voice a whisper. Carefully she sets down her cup, then her glass, on the beige rug. She stands up and turns, catching the cup with the side of her foot, and bolts from the room.

"I'll get a cloth," she hears Nate saying.

She locks herself into Elizabeth's bathroom and washes her hands with Elizabeth's peculiar brown soap. Then she sits, closes her eyes, elbows on her crossed knees, hands covering her mouth. The B & B must be getting to her. Is she really this graceless, this worthless? From her treetop she watches an Ornithomimus, large-eyed, birdlike, run through the scrub, chasing a small protomammal. How many years to learn to grow hair, to bear young alive, to nurture them? How many for the four-chambered heart? Surely these things are important, surely her knowledge should not perish with her. She must be allowed to continue her investigations, here in this forest of early conifers and pineapple-trunked cycad trees.

Everyone has a certain number of bones, she thinks, clutching for lucidity. Not their own but someone else's and the bones have to be named, you have to know what to call them, otherwise what are they, they're lost, cut adrift from their own meanings, they may as well not have been saved for you. You can't name them all, there are too many, the world is full of them, it's made of them, so you have to choose which ones. Everything that's gone before has left its bones for you and you'll leave yours in turn.

This is her knowledge, her field they call it. And it is like a field, you can walk through it and around it and say: These are the boundaries. She knows why the dinosaurs do many of the things they do, and about the rest she can deduce, make educated guesses. But north of the field history begins and the fog takes over. It's like being farsighted, the distant lake and its beaches and smooth-

backed basking Sauropods clear-edged in the moonlight, her own hand a blur. She does not know, for instance, why she is crying.

Saturday, January 22, 1977

ELIZABETH

Elizabeth is lying in bed, arms at her sides, feet together. The weak light from the street lamps comes in stripes through the bamboo blind, falls in bars on the walls, broken by the shadow of the spider plants, curved fingers which do not hold or reach for anything. The window is open a little at the bottom, the wooden slat covering the three holes in the sash of the storm window is lifted, cold air sifts through. Elizabeth opened it before she went to bed, she needed air.

Elizabeth lies with her eyes open. In the kitchen below her, Nates moves dishes. She notes him, pushes him back. She can see up through the dark ceiling, through the joists and layers of plaster and the worn linoleum, blue squares, which she, slovenly landlady, should have replaced long ago, past the beds where the tenants lie asleep, a mother, a father, a child, a family, up through the pink ceiling of their room and out through the rafters and the patched and leaking roof to the air, the sky, the place where there is nothing between her and nothing. The stars in their envelopes of bright gas burn on. Space no longer frightens her. She knows it is uninhabited.

Where did you go? I know you aren't in that box. The Greeks collected all the pieces of the body; otherwise the soul could not get away from the upper earth. To the happy islands. Philip said that tonight, between the *boeuf bourguignon* and the meringue with chocolate ginger sauce. Then he changed the subject, he remembered and was embarrassed, he knew he shouldn't be talking about funerary customs. I smiled, I smiled. It was a closed coffin, naturally. They shipped him north in dry ice, rigid among the cold crystals, fog coming off him like a Dracula movie. Tonight I thought, they forgot something. Part of him has been left behind.

She could not move; nevertheless she had Nate take her to the train in a taxi, where she sat like a slab of rock all the way to Thunder Bay and then on the unspeakable bus. English River. Upsala on one side, Bonheur on the other, Osaquan up the road. He used to point out those names, and the irony, the indignity of having been born and forced to live in English River. "The English," they still said, Scots, French, Indians, what-have-you. The enemy, the despoilers. She was one of the English.

She sat in the back pew, kneeling when the others kneeled, standing when they stood, while Chris, surrounded by meagre flowers, underwent the ceremony.

Luckily it was in English, she could follow it. They even said the Lord's Prayer, a slightly different version. Forgive us our trespasses. When she was young she used to think that meant walking on other people's property. A thing she never did; therefore she did not need to be forgiven. As we forgive those who trespass against us. Get off the lawn, Auntie Muriel used to shout at the running children, opening the front door, then closing it like a mouth behind her voice. The old priest turned towards the people, raising the cup, mumbling, distaste on his face. The Latin was better, you could tell he thought that.

They didn't bury him at a crossroads with a stake, though. Death by misadventure. The shoulders were bowed, the heads bent, his mother in black in the front pew, with a real veil. The other children—Elizabeth supposed that was who they were—lined up beside her.

Afterwards there was coffee at the house. The neighbors brought cookies. One of those small northern bungalows, on a rock, pink and blue like a cake, dark spruce trees all around. Skidoo parked in the shed, the Eaton's Catalogue furniture, the worn store drapes four inches too short. Everything was the way she'd known it would be. The father's carefully-learned English, the mother's dark face, baggy with grief and starch. We wanted him to have a chance. He was doing good. Always a smart boy. An education, finished his Grade Twelve, a steady job. Elizabeth thinking: Bullshit. You drove him out. Hit him when he wouldn't turn into you; right in that shed. We told each other a lot.

The mother: You a friend of his? from the city, eh? Then, as she'd feared, throwing back the veil, the bad teeth showing, pushing her dark face towards Elizabeth, her hair turning to snakes: *You killed him.*

But she could never have made it as far as the train, the taxi even. Chris disappeared without her help or connivance. As far as she knew, his parents, if they still existed, had never heard of her. And her images are all wrong, too. He let on to her at first, hinted, that he was part Indian and part French, Métis, that mythical hybrid; archaic, indigenous, authentic as she was not, his sense of grievance fully earned. He sneered at her, the whiteness of her skin and presumably her blood, made love as if exacting payment, and she'd let herself be bullied. As she would otherwise have not. Then one afternoon, lying depleted on his smoky bed, they'd gone past that into the land of perilous confidences, her scrounging childhood, hunger and unbrushed hair behind her mother's helpless pretensions. Never envy anyone, she'd said, until you know. Now tell me.

It was twilight, drawn curtains, he rubbed his hand over and over her bare shoulder, for the first time he would give her something, give something away, he could hardly do it. It made her wince, that effort, it was not what she wanted. Don't ever drop your defenses, she should have told him; they're there to defend you.

He was only a quarter French, and no Indian at all. The rest was Finnish and English; his mother's name was Robertson. They weren't even poor enough to be romantic, they ran the cigar store, the good one, not the other. No trapper he. The beatings were real enough, but less

frequent than he'd said. Was that when her attention had begun to slip, was she that cruel, that snobbish? Probably.

Despite this, she had not known what to answer to that face looming like a moon, a moon seen close, cold and ravaged. No, she'd said then. It was malice, pride, it was his own damn fault. It wasn't me.

Now she finally wonders. What if? What if she'd left him alone. Foregone that jag, energy flowing into her. I wonder if you have some leftover fur scraps; my daughters make doll clothes out of them. To Chris, who had nothing left over, no reserves he could draw on, no free gifts to hand out. She'd known what she was doing. To be loved, to be hated also, to be the center. She had what he wanted, power over a certain part of the world: she knew how to behave, what fork to use, what went with what. He wanted that *power*. He had two ties, one green, one purple. Neither of them would do. He looked better in a T-shirt, she told him; which she should not have done.

She had that power and she'd let him see it and touch it. She let him see he was deficient and she promised, what? A transformation, a touch on the shoulder, knight-hood. Then she'd stepped back, showing him that he was after all only a vacation, a beautiful picture on a brochure, a man in a loincloth whacking the head off some nondescript coconut. A dime a dozen. Leaving him naked.

She thinks: I treated him the way men treat women. A lot of men, a lot of women; but never me, not on your goddamned life. He couldn't take it. Does she feel pity for him at last, or is it contempt?

Downstairs Nate rattles the silverware, rinsing it, she knows, before putting it into the plastic basket in the dishwasher. She's heard this sound often enough. She turns her eyes away from the stars, looks instead down through the floor. Nate shuffles, cigarette stub in his mouth, lost in some melancholy dream. Mooning, yearning. She watched him this evening, through the dinner which she did not in the least enjoy, the parlour games, she could see it all, he's in love with that giraffe. Coffee on the rug, a minor irritation, she'll have to get it steam-cleaned; also a satisfaction. Lesje is a clown. But is, despite her gawkiness and lack of poise, a younger woman, quite a lot younger than Elizabeth. Elizabeth finds this banal. Tedious, predictable. However, Nate has been what everyone would call *in love* before. She'll give him permission, express interest, be helpful, wait it out. She's been through this before, she can do it with one hand tied behind her back.

(But why bother, another voice says. Why not let him go? Why make the effort?)

There's something else, she remembers now, and it's dangerous. Before, he wanted to be protected. He wanted a woman to be a door he could go through and shut behind him. Everything was fine as long as she was willing to pretend she was a cage, Nate a mouse, her heart pure cheese. He is, she knows, a hopeless sentimentalist Earthmother, Nate her mole, snouting in darkness while she rocked him. I think that I shall never see a poem lovely as a tree. When she gave it up he found Martha, who could not do it nearly as well.

But this time he wants to protect. Looking down at the top of his head, the back of his neck, the way his hands move, deliberately, she knows it, even though he may not know it himself.

Elizabeth sits up in bed. Wires light in her legs and fingers, the walls with their shadows are in place again, the floor is there, the ceiling has healed over. Space is a cube around her, she is the center. There is something to be defended.

Stay in your place, Nate. I will not tolerate that void.

Saturday, January 22, 1977

NATE

Sadly, Nate stacks plates. It's the rule that when Elizabeth cooks, Nate does the dishes. One of the many rules, sub-rules, codicils, addenda, errata. Living with Elizabeth involves a maze of such legalities, no easier to understand because some of them are unspoken. Like an unwary pedestrian, he only realizes he's violated one of these when the bumper hits him, the whistle blows, the big hand descends. Ignorance of the law is no excuse. He imagines Lesje to be without rules.

He sees himself bending to whisper at the bathroom keyhole: *I love you*. Irrevocable commitment, even though he isn't sure whether Lesje, barricaded behind the bathroom door where she'd been for the past half-hour, could really hear him. He isn't sure why she was upset. He'd seen her face as she headed out the door. The coffee stain spreading on the rug behind her; but it wasn't that.

He'd wanted to reach through the bathroom door, comfort her, he thought about knocking, decided against it. What if she opened the door? If he said that to her face, no wall between, he would have to take action. Even though he meant it. He would find himself in mid-air, hurtled into a future he could not yet imagine, Elizabeth left on the solid earth behind him, feet on the ground where she always claimed they were, a dark hummock, the children's face two pale ovals beside her. Receding from him.

He thinks of them (riotously bouncing at this moment on their friend Sarah's spare bed, in the dark, stifling laughter) and sees, not their daily faces, but two little portraits. In silver frames, birthday-party dresses, the dead hues of a black and white photo tinted. He and Elizabeth do not own any such portraits. His children immobilized, stilled. Bronzed. He tries to remember what it was like before they were born, finds he can't. He can only go as far back as Elizabeth, trundling through the days and finally climbing ponderously from the car which he'd bought months before for this occasion, doubling over against the hood; himself solicitous and frightened. They wouldn't let fathers into the delivery room in those days. He walked her to the desk; the nurse looked at him disapprovingly. See what you've done. He installed her in

a ward room, sat as she clenched and unclenched, watched as she vanished down the corridor in a wheelchair. It was a long labor. He slouched in a chair covered with green vinyl, reading back copies of *Sports Illustrated* and *Parents*, feeling his mouth fog up. He wanted a drink badly and all they had was coffee from a machine. Behind doors an earthquake was taking place, a flood, a tornado that could rip his life apart in minutes, and he was shut out from it.

Around him machines wheezed, he dozed. He was supposed to feel anxious and happy, he knew. Instead he found himself wondering: What if they both die? The bereaved young father stood at the graveside, clogged with grief, as the woman once so vibrant and sensuous, who'd smelled of crushed ferns, descended forever into the earth, cradling a stillborn baby the color of suet. He walked down a road, any road, thumbing, heading for some legendary steamer, pack on his back. A broken man.

When he'd finally been allowed in, the event was over. There was a baby where no baby had been. Elizabeth, depleted, was lying propped up in a white hospital gown, a plastic name on her wrist. She looked at him dully, as if he were a salesman or a census-taker.

"Is it all right?" he said, noticing immediately that he'd said "it" rather than "you" or "she." He hadn't even said, "Was it all right." It must have been; she was here, in front of him, she wasn't dead. They all overestimated it.

"They didn't give me the needle in time," Elizabeth said.

He looked down at the baby, wrapped like a sausage roll, held by one of Elizabeth's arms. He felt relieved and grateful, and cheated. She told him several times afterwards that he had no idea of what it was like, and she was right, he hadn't. But she acted also as if this was his fault.

He thinks they were closer before the birth of Janet, but he can't remember. He can't remember what *close* means, or rather what it would have meant once with Elizabeth. She used to make omelettes for him at night after he was finished studying and they would eat them together, sitting in the double bed. He remembers that time as good. Love food, she called it.

Nate scrapes leftover *boeuf bourguignon* into a bowl; later he will put it down the Garb-all. His lapses of memory are beginning to bother him. It's not only Elizabeth, the way (he deduces) she must have been, that's slipping away from him. He loved her, he wanted to marry her, they got married, and he can recall only fragments. Almost a year of law school is gone now; his adolescence is hazy. Martha, once so firm and tangible, is transparent, her face wobbles; soon she will dissolve completely.

And the children. What did they look like, when did they walk, what did they say, how did he feel? He knows events have taken place, important events of which he is now ignorant. What will happen to this day, to Elizabeth's disastrous dinner party, the remains of which are now being ground to shreds by the metal teeth under the sink?

Nate starts the dishwasher, wipes his hands on his pantlegs. He goes to the stairs, quietly, before remembering: the children are away for the night. Lesje too is gone, fleeing almost directly from the bathroom, stopping only

to snatch her coat, her young man in tow. The bun-faced young man whose name Nate can't at the moment recall.

Instead of going to his own cubicle, his cell, he pauses at the children's door, then walks into their room. He knows now that he will leave; it feels, instead, as though they have left him. Here are the dolls, the scattered paint sets, the scissors, the odd socks and rabbit-faced slippers they've forgotten in their haste to pack. Already they are on a train, a plane, headed for some unknown destination, being carried away from him at the speed of light.

He knows they will be back tomorrow morning in time for Sunday brunch, that tomorrow anyway everything will go on the same, that he will stand at the kitchen table dishing out scrambled eggs on toast for himself and the girls and for Elizabeth, who will be wrapped in her blue terry-cloth bathrobe, hair only half-brushed. He will dish out the scrambled eggs and Elizabeth will ask him to pour her a second cup of coffee and it will seem even to him as though nothing is about to happen.

Yet he kneels; tears come to his eyes. He should have held on, he should have held on more tightly. He picks up one of Nancy's blue rabbit slippers, stroking the fur. It's his own eventual death he cradles. His lost, his kidnaped children, gone from him, kept hostage. Who has done this? How has he allowed it to happen?

Tuesday, February 8, 1977

LESJE

Lesje drifts along the street with the drifting snow. Cars in their chains jingle past her, their tires locked in ruts; slush clogs their fenders. In the night there's been a blizzard. She doesn't care that her feet are cold: she has no feet. The trees she passes are heavy with ice. Each twig glitters in the weak sunlight, lit from within; the world glows. Lesje stretches her arms out, feels the blood flow along them to explode in purple at each hand. She knows the blaze of light she sees is only a mitten. But it is a mitten transfigured, its acrylic fibres shining with their own atomic light. Dazzled, she squints her eyes. She's weightless, all pores, the universe accepts her finally, nothing bad can happen. Has she ever felt like this before?

It's only two o'clock. She left the office early, telling Dr. Van Vleet she felt she was coming down with something. Really it's Nate who is coming down with something: he phoned from his house, nasal, forlorn, he has to see her. Lesje walks to the rescue in her gum-soled snowboots, a nurse hurrying over frozen Siberia, driven on by love. She will put her hand on his forehead and miraculously he will revive. By the time she reaches his front steps and stamps her way up them her nose is running.

Nate opens the door, draws her inside quickly, shuts the door before enfolding her. Lesje is pressed against his brown wool dressing gown, which smells of old smoke and

burnt toast. His mouth comes down on hers; sniffing, they kiss. He half-lifts her, then thinks better of it and sets her down.

"My boots will drip," she says, and bends to unzip them. She tugs at her boot heels, her eyes at the level of Nate's knees. He's wearing work socks, grey with red stripes around the top and white toes and heels. These socks, for some reason, fill her with tenderness and lust: her body is with her again.

In their stocking feet they tiptoe along the hall and up the stairs. Nate leads her by the hand.

"In here," he says. Although there is no one home, they whisper.

Nate folds back the Indian spread. Lesje can hardly see: the room is a blur around her, vision a shaft of light illuminating tigers, off-red tigers in a purplish jungle. Under the tigers there are flowered sheets. Wordlessly Nate undresses her, lifting her arms, bending her elbows as if he's undressing a doll or a child; Lesje stands still. He eases her sweater over her head, presses his cheek against her stomach while he kneels to slide down her jeans. Lesje raises one foot and then the other, stepping out, obedient. There's cold air, a draft somewhere in the room. Her skin contracts. Gently he pulls her onto the bed. She sinks into a hollow, petals flow over her.

He's on top of her, both of them impelled now by fear, the sun moving across the sky, the feet walking inexorably towards them, the sound of a door which has not yet opened, boots on the stairs.

Lesje is lying semi-propped on two pillows. His head rests on her belly. The world is again the world, she can see detail, the luminous blur has faded. Nevertheless she's happy. She does not see this happiness as having any necessary result.

Nate moves, reaches for a Kleenex from the night table. "What time is it?" he says. They talk in normal voices now.

Lesje checks her watch. "I'd better leave," she says. She would rather not have Elizabeth or the children come back to find her naked in Nate's bed.

Nate rolls on his side, rests on an elbow while she sits up, slides her legs over the side of the bed. With one hand she gropes for her underpants, lost somewhere in the flowers. She bends to look on the floor. Two shoes are there, on the oval braided rug, black ones, side by side.

"Nate," she says. "Whose room is this?"

He looks at her, he doesn't answer.

"This is Elizabeth's room," she says.

She stands up and begins to dress, covering herself as fast as she can. This is horrible, this is a violation. She feels grubby; it's almost like incest. Elizabeth's husband is one thing, Elizabeth's bed quite another.

Nate doesn't understand. He explains that his own bed is too narrow for both of them.

This is not the point. She thinks: The bed had no choice.

He helps her pull the tiger bedspread up and smooth the pillows. How can she tell him? She doesn't know why she is so upset. Perhaps it's the suggestion that it doesn't matter, that she and Elizabeth are interchangeable. Or his

feeling that Elizabeth's bed is still in some sense his also, he can do whatever he wants in it. Lesje feels for the first time that she has wronged Elizabeth, that she has trespassed.

Lesje sits in the kitchen, elbows on the kitchen table, chin on her hands; Nate lights her cigarette for her. He's baffled. He offers her a Scotch, then a cup of tea. Smoke screens her face.

On the refrigerator there's a child's painting, held in place by a magnetic plastic tomato and a cob of corn. It's of a girl, hair a yellow blob, eyes fringed with enormous lashes, a manic red grin. The sky is a blue line at the top of the page, the sun a bursting lemon.

All the molecular materials now present in the earth and its atmosphere were present at the creation of the earth itself, whether that creation took place by the explosion of a larger body or by condensation of gaseous debris. These molecular materials have merely combined, disintegrated, recombined. Although a few molecules and atoms have escaped into space, nothing has been added.

Lesje contemplates this fact, which she finds soothing. She is only a pattern. She is not an immutable object. There are no immutable objects. Some day she will dissolve.

Nate strokes her hand. He is dismayed but she cannot comfort him.

"What are you thinking about, love?" he says.

Wednesday, February 16, 1977

ELIZABETH

Elizabeth is sitting at the black-topped table in Fran's. Opposite her is William. In front of her is a waffle with a scoop of vanilla ice cream melting on it, and on top of the ice cream is a tentacled formation of partially congealed cinnamon-colored syrup.

She watches the syrup run down and hopes the waitress won't comment on the untouched waffle when she brings the check.

Across the table from her William is eating a club sandwich and drinking draft beer. Elizabeth is only half-listening to the conversation, which consists of an account, by William, of recent research on carcinogenic substances to be found in smoked meats. She's more relaxed now. William doesn't seem to notice that they're in Fran's instead of some *récherché* little hideaway. The first two *récherché* little hideways they tried had been full, and according to William they were the only ones in the area. An area Elizabeth no longer knows well.

Under ordinary circumstances she would have reserved in advance, but she needed to seem impromptu. She happened to be passing by the Ministry of the Environment on her way to do some shopping (false; she never shops at Yonge and St. Clair) and remembered their recent conversation (also false). She thought how fascinating

it would be to pop in on William and hear a little more about the work he was doing (totally false), and if William wasn't busy for lunch, she'd love to have him join her (true, but not for the reasons William may have suspected).

William was even more flattered than she intended him to be. Even now he's swelling visibly, expounding with fervor on degenerate hams and the evil secret life of bacon. She prods at her waffle with her fork and wonders whether she should press his knee discreetly under the table, or is it too soon? She hasn't yet decided exactly how she'll go on from here. Either she will seduce William, to create some balance in the universe, a tit for a tat, or she'll tell him about Lesje and Nate; or perhaps both.

She cuts off a piece of waffle with her fork, lifts it. Then she puts it back on her plate. She remembers why this is something she can no longer eat.

It's May; Elizabeth is coming to life again. Two weeks earlier her mother finally died, after smouldering in the hospital bed for longer than anyone could have expected. Elizabeth sat through that death, watching clear fluid drip from a bottle into her mother's good arm, holding the good hand, watching the good half of the face for any movement, any sign. For two days she didn't eat or sleep, despite Auntie Muriel and the doctor, who said that her mother would not regain consciousness, which was all for the best, and Elizabeth should save her strength. She walked through the funeral step by step, listened to the service, watched her mother float for the second time into the flames. She allowed her hand to be shaken and pressed by the friends of Auntie Muriel. Auntie Muriel planned the whole funeral down to the last detail as if it were an important tea party. She can't tell whether Auntie Muriel is mourning or gloating; there's a pleased fatalism about her. She has the flowers from the funeral around the house in vases—why waste them?—and the house stinks of death.

Auntie Muriel can't seem to stop talking about it. Elizabeth wants to stop talking about it. She wants to stop hearing about it, thinking about it. She never wants to think about her mother again. In two months, less than that, she'll be finished with high school and then she'll get out. Auntie Muriel wants her to go to Trinity College and continue living in the house; she says it will be better for Caroline, which Elizabeth sees as a ruse to trap her.

Elizabeth herself has no such ambitions. She wants only one thing: escape. She can't yet see what form this will take. She can see herself planning, finding a job through the *Star* want ads, hunting a furnished room, packing; making provisions. She can also see herself running out the front door in her nightgown and vanishing forever into a ravine. Both of these things are equally possible.

She can't bear to be inside Auntie Muriel's house with its greyish chrysanthemums, its festering gladioli. The room she shares with Caroline is papered with small blue roses, their stems bunched into doilies, Auntie Muriel's version of girlhood; the furniture is painted white. On her bed Caroline keeps a blue fake-fur pyjama bag in the shape of a cat.

Elizabeth picks up a boy in a drugstore. It isn't the first time, but it's the first time since her mother's death; and in a drugstore. Before it's been street corners, the entranceways to movie houses. This is forbidden: Auntie Muriel allows only formal dances at private schools with the sons of her acquaintances. Elizabeth has no taste for these dances or for the pink-cheeked, short-haired boys who attend them. She prefers boys like this one. He has a ducktail and a red leather jacket with the collar turned up; his black eyebrows almost meet, his chin is cut where he's scraped it shaving. His shorter friend gets out of the car, muttering something to him and laughing, as Elizabeth gets in.

The car is festooned with plastic dice and feather kewpie dolls. Elizabeth likes such cars. There's danger in them but she knows she can control it. She enjoys the latent power of her own hands; she knows she can always stop in time. It excites and gratifies her to be able to do this, go to the edge and almost jump. (There's something else, too. The boys, any boys, any mouth and pair of arms, contain a possibility; some quality she can only guess at, some hope.)

They drive around for a while, then go to Fran's for a waffle. Food is always part of it. Elizabeth gobbles her waffle as if she's never seen one before; the boy smokes, watches her through narrowed eyes. His name is Fred or something and he goes to Jarvis. She tells him where she lives and he tries not to be impressed. Elizabeth feels she knows exactly what Auntie Muriel and her pretensions are worth. This doesn't stop her from displaying them. Auntie Muriel has her terrors, which are real enough to Elizabeth, but increasingly she also has her uses.

They drive around some more, park on a quiet side street. The smell of Old Spice shaving lotion fills the car. Elizabeth waits for the leather arm to arrive, across, over, down. She has no time right now for preliminaries, fumbling with hooks, inching around the rib cage; she does not want to dole herself out. She's filled with energy, she can't tell what it is, anger, fury, denial. What she has in mind is more like a car crash, time squeezed together. Violence, metal on metal.

He's tangled in the steering wheel. Impatient, more reckless than he is, she opens the car door, pulls him down onto the wet grass. Somebody's front lawn. "Hey," he says. He's nervous, he glances up at the curtained windows.

She wants to shout, a huge raucous shout that will startle the darkness, bring the cold crab eyes in these stone houses hurrying to their windows; something that will unlock her throat. She wants to let go of the dead hand she's still holding.

She kisses this mouth that exists only now, does not stop or pull away when the hands move over her, twists to allow him. He groans, hesitates. Then for a minute she almost does scream: she expected pain, but not this kind or this much. Nevertheless she is grinning, teeth set; she exults. She hopes she's bleeding, a little anyway; blood would make this an event. When he goes limp she reaches down to see.

He doesn't understand, he's on his knees beside her, doing himself up, pulling down her skirt, apologizing!

Awkwardly; he's really sorry, he couldn't help it, he didn't mean to. As if she's a foot he's stepped on, as if he's merely sneezed.

She gets out of the car a block from the house. It's later than she thought. The back of her coat is wet and she brushes at it ineffectually before getting out her key. She's convinced Auntie Muriel will be standing on the bottom step of the staircase in her powder blue dressing gown, accusing, malignant, triumphant. Elizabeth has fed her a story about evening choir practice, which, unbelievably, has worked several times before. But she's never stayed out so late. If Auntie Muriel is there, if she knows, Elizabeth can't imagine what she'll do. She can't imagine any actual punishment—rage, banishment, disinheritance—equal to her dread. When she's at a distance from Auntie Muriel she can think of derisive and vulgar things to say to her, but in her presence she knows she would be mute. If Auntie Muriel were roped to the stake she'd be the first to jeer; but who has the power to put her there? Auntie Muriel terrifies her because she doesn't know where to stop. Other people have lines they won't step over, but for Auntie Muriel such lines do not exist. Elizabeth's other fear is that these lines do not exist in herself, either.

But when she unlocks the door the hall is vacant. She walks along the carpet and up the stairs, making it past the inlaid grandfather clock on the landing, past the Chinese vases on their spindly stands at the top of the stairs, pressing her thighs together, blood seeping gently in her clothes. She'll have to wash these clothes herself, privately, dry them in secret. She wants Auntie Muriel to know, wants her to see the evidence of this violation; at the same time she'll do everything to keep her from finding out.

She opens the door of the room she shares with Caroline. The overhead light is on. Caroline is lying on the floor between their beds. She's spread out the plaid mohair blanket from the foot of her bed and is lying on it, arms folded across her breasts, eyes open and fixed on the ceiling. Above her head and at her feet are the silver candelabra from the mahogany buffet downstairs. Beside her there's a bottle of lemon furniture polish. The candles in the candelabra have burned to stubs, gone out. She must have been like this for hours.

Elizabeth knows as soon as she sees her that she's been expecting this or something like it. Caroline would not go to the hospital: she said she didn't want to see their mother. She refused to attend the funeral, and Auntie Muriel, strangely, did not force her. Elizabeth noticed all this, but only from the corner of her eye. Caroline had been so silent lately it was easy not to notice her.

Once, a long time ago, Elizabeth strode through the girl's half of a schoolyard at recess, her arms linked in a chain of other girls. *We don't stop for anybody*. That was the game; you couldn't stop for anybody. Elizabeth kept Caroline's arm gripped firmly under her own; she had to have Caroline with her in the chain so she wouldn't get run down. Caroline was younger, she had trouble keeping up. She was Elizabeth's responsibility. But Elizabeth has

been concentrating all her energy, for years now, on saving herself. She hasn't had any left over for saving Caroline.

She drops to her knees, smooths Caroline's hair back from her forehead above the unblinking eyes. Then she moves one folded arm and puts her head on Caroline's chest. Caroline is still alive.

Once the ambulance and the stretcher had come and gone, but not until then, Elizabeth had knelt on the mosaic-tiled floor of the second-floor bathroom beside the claw-footed tub and thrown up her Fran's Special, ice cream, cinnamon syrup and all. Her penance. About the only one she'd ever been able to make. If she'd been religious, one of the Catholics so detested by Auntie Muriel, she could have lit a candle for the repose of Caroline's soul. But Caroline seemed to have already taken care of that herself.

At the hospital they said she hadn't drunk any of the furniture polish. The open bottle was a sign, Caroline's last message; an indication of where she'd gone, since for all practical purposes she was no longer in her body.

Elizabeth watches while William finishes off his club sandwich and orders apple pie with cheese and a cup of coffee. She dislikes his tie. Someone with William's choirboy complexion should not wear beige and maroon. If Lesje lives with a man who has such poor taste in ties, she's hardly worth defeating.

William doesn't seem to have noticed that Elizabeth isn't eating; he's explaining why colored toilet paper is so much worse than white. Elizabeth knows she will take scant pleasure in sleeping with him or even in making the revelation she's come here to make. Perhaps she won't bother. She's amazed sometimes at the lengths to which people will go to distract themselves. She amazes herself.

Wednesday, February 16, 1977

LESJE

Lesje is cataloguing giant tortoises from the Upper Cretaceous. REPTILIA she writes. *Chelonia*, *Neurankylidae*. GENUS & SPECIES, *Neurankylus baueri*, *Gilmore*. LOCALITY: Fruitland, New Mexico, U.S.A.

GEOLOGY: Upper Crustaceous, Fruitland shale. MATERIAL: Carapace & plastron.

How ignominious to be dug up in Fruitland, Lesje thinks, after so many million years of peace. She's never been to Fruitland but she pictures little souvenir stands where plastic fruits are sold: grape lapel pins, magnetic tomatoes. Or probably, since it's the United States, college students dressed up as giant peaches and apples strolling among the crowds. Like Disneyland.

There's a number in black-ink figures on the slip of paper attached to the carapace, and she adds this number

to the filing card. When she's finished with the larger specimens, she knows there's a whole tray of carapace fragments awaiting her. She'll cart it from the storage shelves up to her office, past the sandblasters and dentist's drills they use for cleaning fossils; when she's finished with it she'll cart it down again and slide it into the storage rack. After that she'll start on the fish earbones from the Miocene. There are hundreds of fish earbones, hundreds of tortoise fragments, hundreds of assorted vertebrae, knuckles, claws, hundreds of teeth. Thousands of pounds of rock, locked into the patterns of the once-living. Sometimes she wonders whether the world, really, needs more fish earbones from the Miocene. On days like this she wonders whether her job isn't, really, just glorified filing.

When she's settled in her cubbyhole of an office with the shell fragments and her clean cards, the phone rings. It's another school group, wanting a tour. Lesje slots them into her calendar. She no longer anticipates school tours with much pleasure. Once she thought she could teach them something. Now she knows there will be at least one child who will want to throw something at the dinosaurs—a bubble-gum wrapper, a pop-bottle top, a pebble—to show he isn't afraid. Mammal cubs, jeering their old enemies. Don't walk on the ledge, she will say. If you push all the buttons at once you won't be able to hear.

Should she make a cup of instant coffee in the wet lab, bring it back to her windowless cubicle, and stay late to finish the tray? Or should she, for once, leave on time?

She peers through the door of the large office adjoining the wet lab. Dr. Van Vleet has already gone, shoehorned his damp rubbers on over his scuffed black shoes and paddled off like a stooped tweed duck into the February slush. Lesje has always been compulsive about her job—she wants very much to do it well—but she's become irritable with it lately. No one, probably, will ever look at the Miocene fish earbones again, once she slots the tray into place. Except her, surreptitiously easing it back out some day to admire their symmetry and size and to imagine the gigantic fish with their bony sheathing, sliding like huge knees through the ancient oceans.

She completes one more card, then closes the filing-card box and goes for her coat. She slips her arms into it, bundles her head, checks her shoulder-bag for money. She'll stop at Ziggy's on the way back to the apartment and pick up something nice for dinner, something nice for William. Ever since she's come to suspect that she may eventually leave him, she's been very solicitous about William. She buys him surprises, tinned sardines, clams, things he likes. When he sniffles she gets him pills, lemons and boxes of Kleenex. It's as if she wants to make sure he's in good condition when she passes him on, trades him in. See, she'll say to him. Look how healthy you are. You don't need me.

She doesn't know how she'll tell him, though; or even when. Nate doesn't want to make any sudden moves, because of the children. He thinks he will rent an apartment or, better still, part of a house, so there will be room for his machines, and move into it a little at a time. He'll tell the children it's a workshop. He hasn't yet indicated

when he would like Lesje to join him, just that he would. Eventually. When the children get adjusted. Sometimes they look at the want ads, trying to decide where he, or possibly they, will finally live.

Lesje looks forward to this time—it would be good to be with him in a neutral bed with no fear of opening doors—but doesn't exactly believe in it. She can't picture, for instance, actually moving. Folding sheets and towels, taking down her posters (from the Museum, mostly, stuck to the walls with masking tape), putting her few dishes and the frying pan her mother gave her when she left home into cardboard cartons. If she really is going to move, she ought to be able to picture it. (And where will William be? At the office? Standing by with arms folded to see that she doesn't take any of his books, or the shower curtains, which were his own purchases, or the *Organic Eating* cookbook they never use?)

Nate hasn't discussed this future move with Elizabeth, though he's discussed other things. Elizabeth knows about them. He and Elizabeth had quite a good talk about it one night while he was having a bath. It's a long-standing habit of Elizabeth's to talk to him while he's in the bathtub, Nate tells her. Though it bothers Lesje slightly to think of them having habits together, she asked, "Was she angry?"

"Not at all," Nate said. "She was very good about it. She's glad I've found someone congenial."

For some reason Elizabeth's approval annoys Lesje more than her anger would have.

"She does think, though," Nate said, "that you should tell William. She feels it's a little dishonest not to. She thinks it's only fair to her. She . . ."

"It's none of her business," Lesje said, surprising herself by her own abruptness. "Why should she care what I tell William?"

"They've become quite friendly," Nate said mildly. "They seem to have lunch together quite a lot. She says it puts her in a false position with William, that she knows and he doesn't."

Lesje hadn't heard about this friendship, these lunches. She felt left out. Why hadn't William mentioned anything about it? Though he rarely tells her who he has lunch with. But this may mean only what she thinks it means; that, like her, he seldom has lunch at all. She sees, too, the threat behind the message; for it was a message, Elizabeth the sender, Nate merely the unwitting deliverer. If she doesn't tell William soon, Elizabeth will tell him herself.

Yet she's been unable to say anything. There hasn't been an opportunity, she tells herself. What's she supposed to do? Interrupt a cribbage game to say, "William, I'm having an affair?"

She swings along the street, head down, carrying the bag of potato salad and fried chicken she's bought at Ziggy's. William once told her she walks like an adolescent boy. But so does he, so they're even.

When she reaches the apartment, William is sitting at the card table. He has a solitaire game spread in front of him, but he's looking out the window.

"I got some stuff from Ziggy's" Lesje says cheerfully. William doesn't answer, which is nothing new. She walks

through the kitchenette, leaving the bag on the counter, and goes into the bathroom.

She's sitting on the bed, pulling off her leather boots, when William appears in the doorway.

He has a strange look on his face, as if his muscles are in spasm. He comes toward her, hulking.

"William, what's wrong?" she says; but he pushes her down on the bed, one arm across both shoulders, his elbow digging in beside her collarbone. His other hand rips at the zipper on her jeans.

William has always like to tumble around a little. She starts to laugh, then stops. This is different. His arm is against her throat, cutting off her wind.

"William, that hurts," she says; then, "William, cut it out!"

He's got her jeans worked halfway down her thighs before it occurs to her that William is trying to rape her.

She's always thought of rape as something the Russians did to the Ukrainians, something the Germans did, more furtively, to the Jews; something blacks did in Detroit, in dark alleys. But not something William Wasp, from a good family in London, Ontario, would ever do to her. They're friends, they discuss extinction and pollution, they've known each other for years. They live together!

What can she do now? If she fights him off, kicks him in the nuts, he'll never speak to her again. She's almost certain she could: her knee's in the right position, he's crouching over her, fumbling at her nylon crotch. But if she lets him go ahead, there's a good chance she'll never speak to him again. It's absurd, and William, huffing and puffing and grinding his teeth, is absurd too. But she knows if she laughs he'll hit her.

This is frightening; he's hurting her on purpose. Maybe he's always wanted to do this but never had the excuse. What is the excuse?

"William, stop," she says; but William tugs and rips, silently, relentlessly, forcing his torso between her knees. Finally she is angry herself. The least he could do is answer her. She clamps her legs together, tightens the muscles of her neck and shoulders, and lets William batter himself against her. He's pulling her hair now, digging his fingers into her arms. Finally he groans, oozes, unclenches.

"Finished?" she says coldly. He's a dead weight. She pries herself out from beneath him, buttons her shirt. She pulls off her jeans and underpants and mops her thighs with them. William, pink-eyed, watches her from the bed.

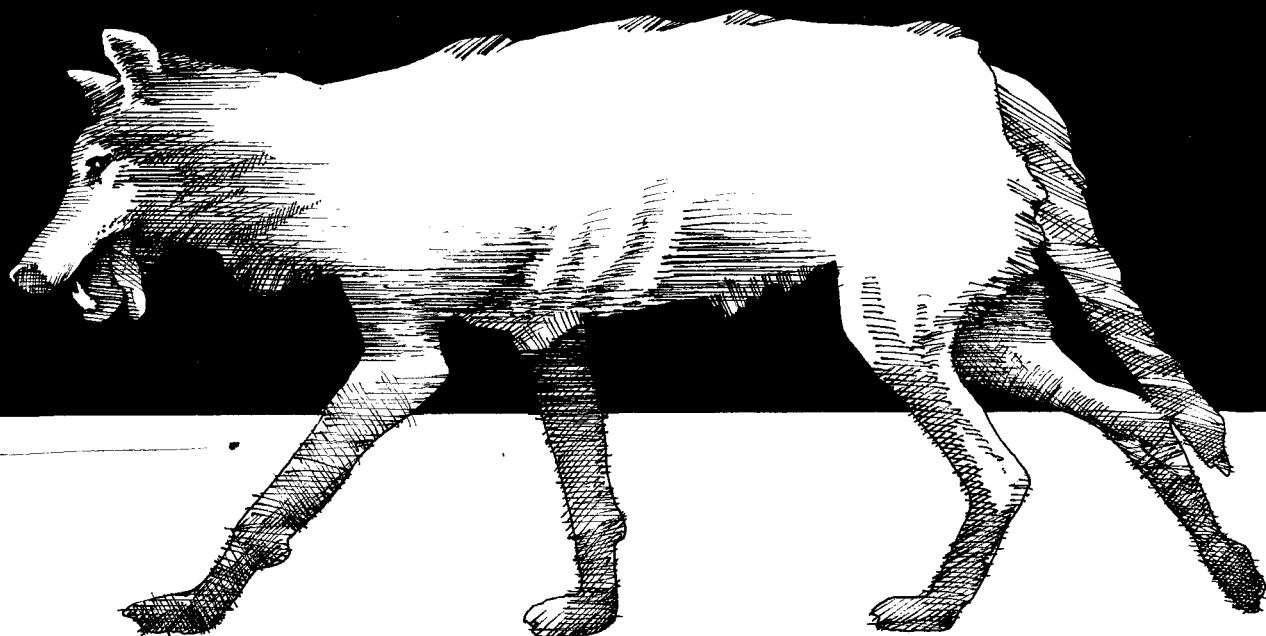
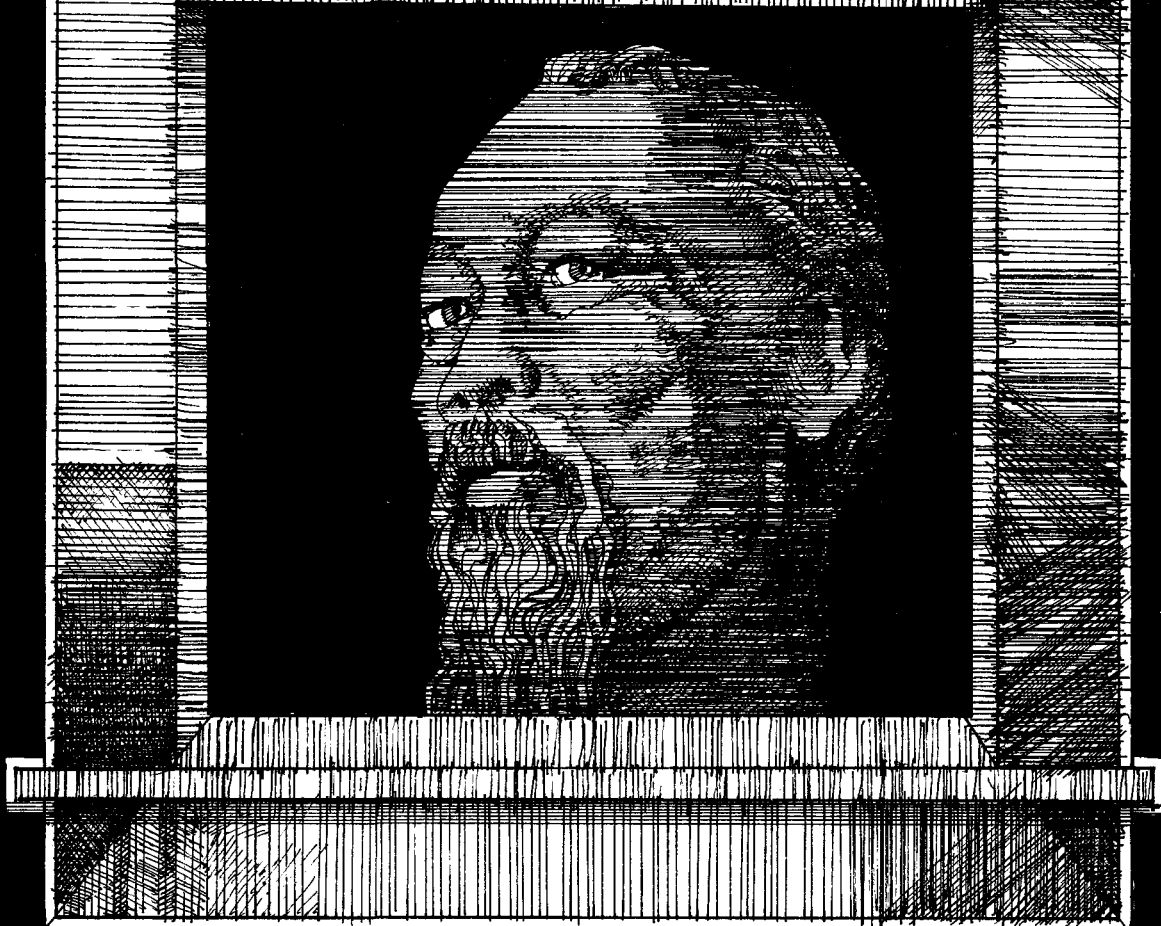
"I'm sorry," he says.

Lesje is afraid he's going to cry. Then she will have to forgive him. Without answering, she goes to the bathroom and stuffs her clothes into the laundry hamper. She wraps a towel around her waist. All she wants to do is have a shower.

She leans her forehead against the cool glass of the mirror. She can't stay here. Where will she go, what will she do? Her heart is racing, there are scratches on her arms and breasts, she's gasping for air. It's the sight of William turning into someone else that has shocked her. She doesn't know whose fault it is. □

TWO STORIES

by John Wideman



Outside her window the last snow of the season is white only until it touches the pavement. Freeda's thoughts are her thoughts only until they reach the cloudy pane of glass where they expire silently, damp as tears, like snow against asphalt.

To believe who she is Freeda must go backward, must retreat, her voice slowly unwinding, slowly dismantling itself, her voice going backward with her, alone with her as the inevitable silence envelops. Talking to herself. Telling stories. Telling herself.

Once . . . once . . . her first baby born premature and breathless. The snow falling and her cousin May snatches away the child from the others who have shrieked, keened, moaned and are already beginning to mouth prayers for the dead. The door slams, shaking the wooden row house on Cassina Way, shattering the calm the women's folded hands and bowed heads are seeking. They realize the still, blue baby is gone. And that May is out there in the snow like a crazy woman with the dead child in her arms and ain't took time for coat or nothing she'll catch her death too in the blizzard that has its hand inside the house now and flings the door again and again crashing against its frame.

Once . . . how many years ago . . . Freeda was a baby then, she was forgiving then, burying her head in the wet pillow, hiding her eyes from theirs because she does not want to read the death of her first born in the women's faces. She wants to forgive. Forgive John French for the nights he loved her. Forgive the eyes of the women who smiled knowingly when she complained, who showed her their scars and wrinkled flesh, who said *Jesus* and smiled, and winced when she did and said *everything's gone to be all right, child* and *Thank Jesus* and *ain't she beautiful she carries high like her mama, Bess* and *her skin's so pretty and eat, Honeychild, eat everything you want you eating for two now*. Who held her hand and rubbed her back and trudged through the snow to boil water and boil rags and stand on tired feet when it was time for her baby to come.

But their eyes are not the eyes of children. She cannot believe they knew everything else and didn't know the baby was twisted wrong side down in her belly. Freeda passes her gaze from one face to the other. They were ready to pray. They had been praying all along so they knew all along and she couldn't forgive. If someone would press her face down into the pillow she would turn blue like her baby was blue. The women's sorrowing, helpless faces would go away. She could forgive them. Her aunts, her neighbors, her cousin May, a girl like she is still a girl. Freeda knows their faces better than she knows her own. She hates what hovers sorrowing in their eyes.

Freeda hears the women rush away. The ragged, noisy lift of a flock of pigeons scared from the sidewalk. They are abandoning her. They were mountains rimming the valley of her pain. They were statues, stiff as the mourning women huddling over the broken body of Jesus in the picture in the Sunday School corner of Homewood A.M.E. Zion Church. Now they are fleeing and she is alone. Not even her baby beside her, if there was a baby borne to her by that sea of pain.

THE CHINAMAN

The toasts—long, bawdy, rhymed narratives invented by black street bards—contain much new slang but also preserve older words and ways of speaking. In the toasts the Chinaman appears as a symbol of decay and death.

May . . . May . . . They are shouting through the open door.

May is kneeling in the snow across Cassina Way where it has drifted waist deep. She hunches forward shielding the baby from the wind, while she plunges its naked body into the snow. She must turn her face into the wind to see the others. Her hair, her eyebrows and cheeks are caked with white. She is a snow witch and nobody moves a step closer. She hollers something at them which the wind voids.

Then May struggles to her feet, and stomps back through the gaping door with the baby in her arms. She is praising Jesus and Halleluhing and prancing the floor before anybody can grab the door and get it shut behind her.

"Wouldn't be for that I be telling a different story altogether. Yes indeed. She was so tiny could fit in a shoebox. Now, I ain't lying. If I'm lying, I'm flying. It's the God's truth, sure enough. Didn't weigh but a pound and a half. Weeniest little thing you ever did see. Called her mite. You know like little mighty mite. Course there was something else in that name too. Couldn't help but think that little girl child *might* make it and she *might* not. And everybody scared to call her anything but mite. Such a tiny little thing. Feed her with one of them eye drop-pers. Didn't sleep or nap unless it be on somebody's bosom so she stay warm. Little thing curl up just like an eensy-beensy monkey, curl up right on your chest with that thumb in her mouth. The cutest thing. She got that little thumb and gone. Couldn't hardly see the nails on her fingers they be so tiny."

The first born, Lisabeth, our mother, saved by May in the snow. May told the story a hundred times but each time it's new and necessary. If she didn't tell the story right, there would be no baby shuddering to life in her arms when she runs through the crashing door. There would be no Lisabeth, none of us would be gathered in my grandmother's house on Finance Street listening to May. And then the boy, Uncle Carl, birthed by my Grandmother. Making it all seem so easy. Spring born. Bright and cleansing like the new rain sluicing along the curb. A boybaby in Freeda's arms, plump and crying. Peace. As if his coming was a promise to her of how it

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would always be. How it should be easy. So when the twins came and died, one at birth, the other, named John after his father, holding on six weeks, whatever peace brought by the first son was shattered, broken and strewn in Freeda's path like bits of glass, like the dry, splintered bones in the Valley of the Shadow she must cross in her bare feet as her body swells again and again life and death share her belly. Finally Geraldine and Martha and Alberta. Five then. The seasons passing. The children real then. As real as her weight on her body. John French pressing her down into the starched sheets, her body a leaf between the pages of a book. Sometimes, straightening the bed, when she pulls back the homemade quilt she sees her form etched in the whiteness. She touches her edges, her hollows, smooths the wrinkles, pats the indentations, laying her hands where his have been, finding herself as she leans over the sprawled figure his bulk has pressed into the sheets.

Because she knows one day she will roll back the patchwork, velvet-edged, story-telling quilt and there will be nothing. Because her body's outline not deepened by his weight is only a pale shadow, a presence no more substantial than what might be left by a chill wind.

Freeda watches the snow beat noiselessly against the window. The faces of the women gather around her again, but they are older now, wrinkle old, gray old, like her own face last time she saw it in the oval mirror of the oak dresser at the foot of their bed. She calls it *their* bed even though she knows the faces, crowded and stomped down as the sooty hills on which Homewood is dying, have come to tell her John French is gone. If you are just a child and marry a man, one day you will grow up and the man will be gone. He can't wait and you can't hurry. Even though trying hard to hurry and to wait are the best part of your love, what makes your love better than what passes for love around you. One day he'll be gone and that will be that. Twice your age when he stole you. Twice your age when he sat with his elbows on his knees and his shoulders hunkered down and his eyes downcast, sprawled all arms and legs on the stool in Aunt Aida's front room while you told her back where she and Uncle Bill slept, I'm married now and she said, Yes you are now. I can tell just looking at you. John French married you good. Married you real good, didn't he. Saying the words so they hurt so you felt brazen like the wench and hussy she didn't need to say you were. Not calling any names. Not fussing but saying the words so *married* was a door slammed between them, so *married* was the ashes of all those years Aunt Aida and Uncle Bill had sacrificed to raise her. John French is quiet as she's ever seen him in her life till Aunt Aida leaves her in the dark little bedroom and whispers something to her man Bill and Uncle Bill goes to the closet and gets not the shotgun he had loaded and set inside there but his jug of whiskey and two glasses and pours and hands one to John French.

Yes, she wants to scream. Of course he's dead. What else is he supposed to be with me lying up here an old woman. He was too big to move wedged between the seat of the toilet and the edge of the bathtub. She had heard him fall all the way from the kitchen and flew up the steps two and three at a time getting to him. Ain't no room to

put my knees, he'd grumble. Shame when a man can't even squat right in his own house. She crashed open the door with both hands. She had heard him groan once while she rushed up the steps but he lay still now and her heart leaping in her chest was the only sound in the bathroom. But when she clambered on her knees under the sink so she could touch him and raise his face from the pool of vomit spreading on the linoleum she could hear the pipes gurgle and the leaky guts of the toilet hissing. She did as much as she could before she ran to the window outside the door and screamed into the backyards of Cassina Way for help.

It was Fred Clark who came first. Who helped her drag John French from between the toilet and the tub that was always bumping his knees. He must have died while she was at the window because he was dead weight when they lifted him and dead when they laid him across *their* bed.

Someone always comes. . . . Homewood people are good about coming. And they're best about coming around when there's nothing they can do. When someone's dead and the faces hovering around you are like flowers cut for a funeral. Fred Clark came and then Clara sent that useless pigeon-toed man of hers and they got John French laid across their bed. And Clara Simms down at the bottom of the steps moaning, *Have Mercy, Have Mercy*. Moaning it like you know she's gone to moan it every time she tells the story she can't wait to tell about John French dying in the bathroom and I heard Freeda screaming for help and sent Rob over there and I was so shocked you know how much I done prayed for John French to do right I was so shocked I couldn't even get up the steps I just stood at the bottom praying *God have mercy, God have mercy* cause I knowed he was dead.

She counts the faces. There are three. But then there are three more and three more and more threes than she can count above her. Then there is one face hiding behind the others. A face the others cannot see because they stare down at her, stare with their eyes full of tears and their mouths full of prayers so they never see the yellow face grinning behind them, the man who is the only man in the room, the Chinaman with his shrivelled yellow walnut of a face. He laughs at her, he is the only one who knows she knows John French is long dead.

The curled edge of the clawfoot tub and the bottom of the sink are cold as she crawls to him. Her feet sneak away and run naked into the snow. Once she had dreamed it would happen this way. A cold, white dream which made her shiver long after she awakened. In the dream the Chinaman sat on a fence. He flashed teeth like gold daggers and laughed and laughed at his ownself trying to make a dollar out of fifteen cents. Chinky, chinky, Chinaman and she was laughing too but then he started to melt, started to run down out of the funny pajama looking suit he was wearing. Then his face blew up like a watermelon. The skin got fatter and fatter so it swoll up and closed his eyes and closed his mouth and all the rest of him just yellow water running down the fence. And she knew she shouldn't be laughing. Knew that he wasn't laughing at himself but at what was going to happen to her when he finished melting and all the insides of him exploded through that big moon face. She began to shiver when she

realized the face was filled with something cold. Like snow only it would be the color of the stuff leaking down out of his pantlegs, that pee color and oily like that stuff only cold, colder than anything she had ever touched, cold so the icy pieces of jelly when they flew against her body would turn her to stone.

Three months had passed since my Grandmother's death. I had flown to Pittsburgh alone to her funeral. When I returned home I hadn't said much about her. The weather in Pittsburgh had been cold and damp. On the day of the funeral it rained. There wasn't much to say about all of that, about the grey streets and sombre grey hills crowded with ramshackle houses and the grey people shrouded in raingear or huddling under umbrellas. I couldn't talk about that because it was too depressing, and I couldn't talk about the storytelling and whiskey all night after we buried my grandmother either. You had to be part of the whole thing to understand why we could laugh and get high while Aunt May, tucked back into an overstuffed chair so her stockinged feet barely touched the rug, told us the stories of Homewood. Our laughter wouldn't seem appropriate unless you had been there through everything and heard how she was saying what she was saying. So I didn't talk much when I got home. I let the trip slowly seep inside me. Sipped it without really tasting it the way I sipped Jim Beam that night May told stories.

Our family had begun its annual migration East. Five hundred miles the first day and another three hundred next day before a flat. There had been a sickening swerve and I hit the brake too hard and lost control but luckily just for an instant and then the Custom Cruiser let me guide it onto the shoulder of the highway. As I began the process of changing the tire, which meant first unpacking a summer's worth of luggage to get at the spare in the back of the station wagon and finding one piece of the jack missing, and cursing the American way of leaving little things out, the sky over my shoulder had divided itself neatly into a layer of dense gray and one of luminous, spooky whiteness. The dark half above squeezing light out of the sky; all the energy in the band of white squirming and heating up as it is compressed into a smaller and smaller space. Then drum rolls of thunder and jagged seams of light splitting the darkness.

We were in Iowa. One of those featureless stretches of Interstate Eighty which are a way of getting nowhere fast. Judy yelled at me to get inside the car. She has a morbid fear of lightning so I feel it's my duty to cure her, to treat thunderstorms with disdain and nonchalance and survive. So I took my good time stuffing in the last few boxes and suitcases I had unloaded. The highway would buckle each time a semi passed. That sudden caving in of the earth scared me more than the threat of thunderbolts delivered from the sky. I winced every time, stepping backward, swaying in the blast of hot air as the trucks exploded just a few feet away.

The first rain drops were as big as eggs. Not falling but flung in handfuls so they struck inside the station wagon splattering the bags before I could get the tail gate shut.

Behind the wheel again I dried my hands, face and the back of my neck. I felt like I had been running a long time, running fast and strong and the exhilaration of my body had made me slightly breathless, a little giddy.

"Why are you so foolish? Why did you stay out there till the last minute?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"It's not funny. Look at the boys. You've managed to terrify them acting like a fool." In the faces of the children strapped in their carseats behind us I could see the echo of their mother's fear, an immense silence welling behind their eyes.

But it was good in a way. The steady drumming on the roof, the windows steamed shut, the windblown sheets of rain suddenly splashing against the metal skin. All hell breaking loose outside, but we were inside, cocooned, safe, together. I liked the isolation, the sudden detour. "Hey, you guys. It's like being in a space ship. Let's pretend we're on our way to Mars. Prepare for blast-off."

And there was the business of assigning roles, the squabbles over rank, the exact determination of a noise level for our rocket motors which would not encourage the migraine Judy felt coming on.

But we launched successfully from that Iowa plain. Though we were knee deep in water, and some controls smoking and sputtering, our ark rose, shuddering in the girdle of rain but quickly through it, gathering speed and thrusting pure and swift wherever. . . .

So I could relinquish the controls and shut off the intercom and plead the weariness of six days exploring a virgin planet, battling the Dictosaurs, the Todals, the men whose heads grow beneath their shoulders. The ship was safe in other hands so I could shut my eyes and listen to the rockets purr calmly through the inter-Galactic night.

That's when I saw her. When my grandmother, Freeda came to me. She is wearing a thin, gray cardigan, buttonless, perhaps another color once, mauve perhaps as I look more closely or perhaps the purplish blue of the housedress beneath the worn threads gives the wool its suggestion of color. The sleeves of the sweater are pushed back from her wrists. One long hand rests in her lap. The skin on the back of her hand seems dry and loose. If she tried to lift anything heavier than the hand to which it was attached, her fragile wrist protruding from the cuffed and frayed sweater sleeve would snap. She sits in her wooden rocker in front of the fireplace which has been covered over with simulated brick contact paper. Just over her head is the mantelpiece crowded with all of our pictures. The television set is muttering a few feet away. Bursts of laughter and applause. Dull flickers of light as the image twitches and rolls. She reaches inside the front of her dress and fumbles with the catch of a safety pin which secures the handkerchief cached there against her underclothes. Lilies hidden beneath her dress. Lilies spreading in her lap as she unties the knotted corners of the flowered handkerchief. In the center of the handkerchief a few coins and two or three bills folded into neat squares, one of which she opens as slowly as she had opened the silk. When she learned to talk again after her stroke, she could

only manage a minimal movement of her lips. Her head moves from side to side with the effort of producing the strange, nasal, tonal language of rhythms and grunts. If you listened closely, you could detect the rising and fallings of familiar sentence patterns. The words blurred and elided but you could get the message if you listened.

Take it. Take it. Take it, Spanky. I am leaving home. The first one in the family to go off to college. She thrusts the money in my hand. *Take it. Go on, boy.* A five dollar bill as wrinkled and criss-crossed as the skin at the corners of her eyes.

Over the wind and rain and rockets and the cars driven by madmen still careening past on the invisible highway I hear her offering the money . . . the strange, haunted whine I would write if I could . . .

Three months and finally it was time. I needed to talk about her. The storm deserted us. We limped to a gas station and they fixed the flat and promised they'd have a whole jack for us next morning. We decided to stop for the night just down the road a ways in the place the mechanic had recommended, a Holiday Inn overlooking the Mississippi River. After the kids were asleep I began to talk about my grandmother. I wished for May's voice and the voices of my people in a circle amening and laughing and filling in what I didn't know or couldn't remember, but it was just me whispering in the dark motel room, afraid to wake my sons.

For nearly twenty years they took care of her. My Aunt Geraldine and Uncle Carl, the first son. The other girls including my mother had married. Within a week after her husband's death Freeda had a stroke, almost dying, and though her body recovered, her will did not. Wanting only to follow her dead husband everybody said. To be with John French they all said. Yet she was still their mother. And they still lived under her roof, so for twenty years Geraldine and Carl nursed the shell she had become. The last year of her life she spent mainly in the hospital. She had stopped moving and seldom talked. Her blood thickened so there was always the threat of pneumonia or a clot that needed watching. Endless shots and medicines which might achieve three or four lucid hours a week. During her last month at home before the final confinement in Allegheny Hospital she became deeply agitated. Like a light bulb which glows unnaturally bright just before it pops, her condition seemed to improve. Her eyes were animated again, she struggled to speak and be listened to. My Aunt Geraldine and Uncle Carl were excited. Talked of miraculous remissions, reprieves, God changing his mind in the eleventh hour. Even though it was terror filling her eyes, even though her gestures and nasal keening described a phantom who had begun to prey on her.

Carl understood the word first, the sound Freeda had begun to repeat constantly. For weeks it had remained a mystery, part of her improved condition, part of her terror. Then, with the certainty of something known all along, Carl matched a word with the sound. A word not discovered but remembered. He couldn't believe the word had escaped him so long once he matched it to the sound she had been shaping. *Chinaman*. When he repeated it back to

her the first time aloud, her chin dropped to her chest. A gagging sound came from her throat. As if the word summoned a Chinaman, diabolical and menacing beside the rocker. *Chinaman. Chinky, chinky Chinaman, sitting on a fence, Trying to make a dollar out of fifteen cents.* Hiding in corners. Hovering over her bed at night. Pulling her clothes awry. Raking his nails across her face and hands, inflicting the red wounds she showed them in the morning.

Of course he followed her to the hospital. Every member of the family knew him. The Chinaman's vigil as faithful as the shifts of relatives who tended my Grandmother as she lay dying. She slept most of the time. Drugged. Too fatigued to lift her eyelids. I began disbelieving in her. I was glad I was far away and didn't have to trek to the hospital. But the others were faithful. They did the bathing, the touching, the holding on till nothing else remained. It was to them she complained of the Chinaman. But against the background of her slow, painful dying, the Chinaman became for the family a figure of fun. Mama's Chinaman. They talked about him like a dog. Transformed him into an aged suitor courting her with flowers, candy and teenage awkwardness. Making fun of him. Telling stories about his appearances and disappearances, his clothes, his hiding places, how he whistled at the nurses and pinched their behinds. The Chinaman became a sort of Kilroy for the family. His signature turning up in unexpected places. His name implicated in any odd or obscene occurrence in the hospital.

One day they moved an oriental man into a room down from my Grandmother's ward. The people in my family became acquainted with his people, sharing cigarettes and gossip in the visitors' lounge. Since both patients slept most of the day, the social gatherings in the lounge offered an opportunity to exchange commiserations, but also a chance to return to the world of health and well-being without totally deserting the realm of the sick. . . .

But the story was stiff, incomplete. I said I'd tell the rest when Judy felt better. She fell asleep quickly but I heard the paddle-wheeled steamers packed with cotton and slaves ply the river all night long.

Two more days on the road. Then we are in my mother's kitchen. The house is quiet. Relatives and friends in and out all day as always during our summer visits. It's good to see everybody but the days are long and hot and busy so it's also good when the last person leaves. My mother, Lisabeth, and my wife and I are in the kitchen. It's after twelve and the house is quiet. *Five things*, my mother says. *Five things in my life I'll never forget.* She doesn't tell us what the other four are, but she does tell us about the Chinaman.

"Carl and I were sitting with Mama at the hospital. It must have been around six because I heard them collecting the dinner trays. She had had a bad day. I still don't know how she lasted as long as she did. Her arms weren't any bigger around than this . . . there just wasn't anything left . . . how she held on I'll never know. She had been coughing all day and they were always worried about it getting in her lungs. Anyway we were kinda down and just sitting listening to the awful rattling in her sleep when he

walked in leaning on the arm of his daughter. She was a nice girl. We always talked in the lounge. She was steady about coming to see her father. You could tell she was really worried about him and really cared. A pretty girl, too. Well, she only brought him as far as the door. I guess she heard Mama sleeping and how quiet we were so she just waved from there and sort of whispered her father was going home in the morning and good luck. And the old Chinaman peeked around into the room. I guess he was curious about Mama so he poked his head in and looked at her and then they were gone. That's all. Stopped to say goodbye just like we would have said goodbye to them if we could have taken Mama home out of that place.

"Mama never woke up again. She died early the next morning and when I walked down the hall with the nurse I looked in that Chinese man's room and it was empty.

"That's just the way it happened. I was there, I know. He peeked in and Mama never woke up again. I can't tell you how many times I've asked myself how she knew. Because Mama did know. She knew that Chinaman was coming for her. That he'd walk in her door one day and take her away. Things like that happen in people's lives. I know they do. Things you just can't explain. Things that

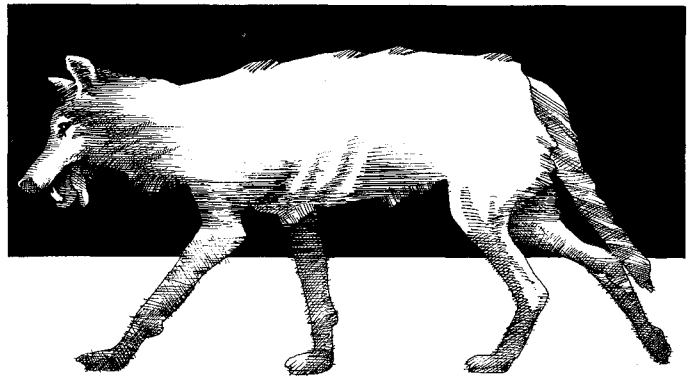
stay with you. Not to the day I die will I understand how Mama knew, but I do know things like that don't just happen. Five times in my life I've been a witness and I don't understand but I'm sure there's a plan, some kind of plan."

I am sleepy but the story gets to me the way it did the first time I heard it. My mother has told it, finished it like I never can. And the shape of the story is the shape of my mother's voice. In the quiet house her voice sounds more and more like May's. My mother doesn't wave her arms like May or rise and preacher-strut like May when May gets the spirit. My mother's hands drum the table edge, or slowly the fingertips of one hand stroke and pull and knead those of the other. For her the story of the Chinaman is a glimpse of her God who has a plan and who moves in mysterious ways. For me the mystery of the Chinaman is silence, the silence of death and the past and lives other than mine, the silence which separates me and brings me closer to my mother, the silence drawing me in and excluding me when I listen to the stories of my people.

I watch her pale fingers shuttle in and out of one another. I watch my wife slip into her own quietness, distant and private. The silence is an amen. □

DADDY GARBAGE

"Be not dismayed
What ere betides . . .



Daddy Garbage was a dog. Lemuel Strayhorn whose ice ball cart is always right around the corner on Hamilton just down from Homewood Avenue is the one who named the dog and since he named him, claimed him, and Daddy Garbage must have agreed because he sat on the sidewalk beside Lemuel Strayhorn or slept in the shade under the two-wheeled cart or, when it got too cold for iceballs, followed Strayhorn thru the alleys on whatever errands and hustles the old man found during the winter to keep food on the stove and smoke in the chimney of the little shack behind Dummerline. The dog was long dead but Lemuel Strayhorn still peddled the paper cups of crushed ice topped with sweet syrup, and he laughed and said, "Course I remember that crazy animal. Sure I do. And I named him Daddy Garbage all right, but I can't say now why I did. Must of had a reason though. Probably a damn good reason at the time. And you a French, ain't you. One

of John French's girls. I can see him plain as day in your face, gal. Which one is you. Lemme see now. There was Lisabeth, the oldest, and Geraldine and one more. . . ."

She answers: "Geraldine, Mr. Strayhorn."

"Sure you are. That's right. And you done brought all these beautiful babies for some ices."

"You still make the best."

"Course I do. I been on this corner before you was born. Knew your Daddy when he first come to Homewood."

"This is his grandson. Lisabeth's oldest, John; and those two boys are his children. The girls belong to Lisabeth's daughter, Tish."

"You got fine sons there, and them is pretty little girls, too. I can hear John French now, braggin bout his children. He should be here today. You all want ices? You want big or small?"

"Small for the kids and I want a little one, please, and he'll take a big one, I know."

"You babies step up and tell me what kind you want. Cherry, Lemon, Grape, Orange and Tutti-frutti. Got them all."

"You remember Mr. Strayhorn. Don't you, John?"

"Uh huh. I think I remember Daddy Garbage too."

"You might of seen a dog around, son, but wasn't no Daddy Garbage. Naw, you're too young."

"Mr. Strayhorn had Daddy Garbage when I was a little girl. A big, rangy, brown dog. Looked like a wolf. Scare you half to death if you didn't know he was tame and never bothered anybody."

"Didn't bother nobody long as they didn't bother him. But that was one fighting dog once he got started. Dogs got so they wouldn't even bark when Daddy Garbage went by. Tore up some behinds in his day, yes, he did."

"I wish you could remember how he got that name."

"Wish I could tell you, too. But it's a long time ago. Some things I members plain as day, but you mize well be talking to a fence post you ask me bout others. Shucks, Miss French. I been on this corner making ice balls seem like 400 years if it's a day."

"You don't get any older. And I bet you still remember what you want to remember. You look fine to me, Mr. Strayhorn. Look like you might be here another 400 at least."

"Maybe, I will. Yes Mam, just might. You children eat them ices up now and don't get none on them nice clothes. God bless you all."

"I'm going to ask you about that name again."

"Just might remember next time. You ax me."

"I surely will. . . ."

Snow fell all night and in the morning Homewood seemed smaller. Whiteness softened the edges of things, smoothed out the spaces between near and far. Trees drooped, the ground rose up a little higher, the snow glare in your eyes discouraged a long view, made you attentive to what was close at hand, what was familiar, yet altered and harmonized by the blanket of whiteness. The world seemed smaller till you got out in it and understood that the glaze which made the snow so lustrous had been frozen there by the wind, and sudden gusts would sprinkle your face with freezing particles from the drifts as you leaned forward to get a little closer to the place you wanted to go, the place which from your window as you surveyed the new morning and the untouched snow seemed closer than it usually was. The only way to make it up the alley behind Dumferline was to stomp right into the drifted snow as if the worn shoes on your feet and your pants legs pegged and tucked into the tops of your socks really kept out the snow. Strayhorn looked behind him at the holes he had punched in the snow. Didn't seem like he had been zig-zagging that much, looked like the tracks of somebody who been pulling at a jug of Dago Red. The dog's trail wandered even more than his, a nervous tributary crossing and recrossing its source. Dog didn't seem to mind the snow or the cold, sometimes even seemed fool enough to like it, rolling on its side and kicking up its paws or bounding to a full head of steam then leaping and belly

flopping splay-legged in a shower of white spray. Still a lot of pup in the big animal. Some dogs never lost those ways. With this one, this garbage can raiding champion he called Daddy Garbage, Strayhorn knew it was less holding on to puppy ways than it was a stone craziness, craziness age or nothing else was ever going to change.

Strayhorn lifts his foot and brushes off the snow caked bubble of sock and pantsleg bunched above his ankle. His back foot anchored in the hole it had just dug, he stares at the foot he has cleaned as if he might be able to figure out something to do with it besides plunging it again into the snow. Waste of time to clean his feet. Going to be a wet, nasty day and nothing for it. Feet would get numb soon anyway and not come back till he rested in front of a fire. He pushes through the crust again and the crunch of his foot breaks a stillness older than the man, the alley, the city growing on the steep hills.

Somebody had set a lid of peeling plywood atop a tin can. Daddy Garbage was up on his hind legs, pushing with his paws and nose against the snow capped cover. The perfect symmetry of the crown of snow was the first to go, gouged by the dog's long, worrying snout. Next went the can. Then the lean-backed mongrel sprawled over the metal drum, mounting it and getting away from it simultaneously so he looked like a clumsy seal trying to balance on a ball. Nothing new to Strayhorn. The usual ungodly crash was muffled by the snow but the dog's nails scraped as loudly as they always did against metal garbage cans. The spill looked clean and bright against the snow, catching Strayhorn's eye for a moment, but a glance was all he could spare because he knew the trifling people living in those shacks behind Dumferline didn't throw anything away unless it really was good for nothing but garbage. Slim pickins sure enough, and he grunted over his shoulder at the dog to quit fooling and catch up.

When he looked back again, back at his solitary track, at the snow swirls whipped up by the wind, at the thick rug of snow between the row houses, at the whiteness clinging to window ledges and door sills and rag-tag pieces of fence, back at himself coming up the alley as if he was just beginning his trip but had finished it too, and could watch himself tramping up the alley over and over from where he stood, back at the overturned barrel and the mess spread over the snow, he saw the dog had ignored him and stood stiff legged, whining at a box disgorged from the can.

He cursed the dog and whistled him away from whatever foolishness he was prying into. Nigger garbage ain't worth shit, Strayhorn muttered, half to the dog, half to the bleakness and the squalor of the shanties disguised this bright morning by snowfall. What's he whining about and why am I going back to see. Mize well ask a fool why he's a fool as do half the things I do.

To go back down the alley meant walking into the wind. Wind cutting steady in his face and the cross drafts snapping between the row houses. He would snatch the dog's eyeballs loose. He would teach it to come when he called whether or not some dead rat or dead cat stuffed up in a box got his nose open.

"Daddy Garbage, I'm gonna have a piece of your skull." But the dog was too quick and Strayhorn's swipe

disturbed nothing but the frigid air where the scruff of the dog's neck had been. Strayhorn tried to kick away the box. If he hadn't lost his balance grabbing at the dog and the snow hadn't tricked his legs, he would have sent it flying, but the impact of his foot against the cardboard was no more than a nudge which dislodged the top of the box and flipped it on its side so the frozen lump inside slipped out gently onto the snow.

At first Strayhorn thought it was a doll. A little dark brown doll somebody had gouged the eyes out of, or squashed, or played with till the insides started to spill all over somebody's living room. A one-armed or one-legged doll, a headless torso or torso-less head like he'd find sometimes pink and blue-eyed and blonde or sometimes like this one, a little, battered, brown-skinned doll, but when he said *Oh my God* and stepped away, and was whining and stiff legged as the dog had been and took little shuffling steps first back, then towards, then back again away from the tiny figure in the snow, he knew it was something dead.

"Aw shit, Aw shit, Daddy Garbage." When he knelt, he could hear the dog panting beside him, see the hot, rank steam, and smell wet fur. The body lay face down in the snow, only its head and shoulders free of the newspapers stuffed in the box. Some of the wadded paper had rolled free and the wind sent it scudding across the frozen crust of snow.

The child was dead and the man couldn't touch it and he couldn't leave it alone. Whining, Daddy Garbage had sidled closer. This time the swift, vicious blow caught him across the skull. The dog retreated, kicking up a flurry of snow, snarling, clicking his teeth once before he began whimpering from a distance. Under his army greatcoat Strayhorn wore the grey wool hunting vest John French had given him after John French won all that money and bought himself a new leather one with brass snaps. Strayhorn draped his overcoat across the upright can the dog had ignored, unpinned the buttonless vest from his chest and spread it on the snow. A chill was inside him. Nothing in the weather could touch him now. Strayhorn inched forward on his knees till his shadow fell across the box. He was telling his hands what they ought to do, but they were sassing. He cursed his raggedy gloves, the stiff fingers inside them that would not do his bidding.

The box was too big, too square shouldered to wrap in the sweater vest. Strayhorn did not want to touch the frozen body, so he lifted it and placed it paper and all in the center of the sweater and folded over the tattered grey edges. The bundle rustled like dry leaves when he pressed it against his chest.

Once he had it in his arms he couldn't put it down, so he struggled with his coat like a one-armed man, pulling and shrugging, till it shrouded him again. Not on, really, but attached so it dragged and flapped with a life of its own, animation which excited Daddy Garbage and gave him something to play with as he minced after Strayhorn as Strayhorn retraced his own footsteps, clutching the lump to his chest, moaning and blinking and tearing as the wind lashed his face.

An hour later Strayhorn was on Cassina Way hollering

for John French. Lisabeth shooed him away with all the imperiousness of a little girl who had heard her Mama say, "Send that fool away from here. Tell him your Daddy's out working." When the girl was gone and the door slammed behind her, Strayhorn thought of the little wooden birds who pop out of a clock, chirp their message and disappear. He knew Freeda French didn't like him. Not anything personal, not anything she could change or he could change, just the part of him which was part of what drew John French down to the corner with the other men to talk and gamble and drink wine. He understood why she would never do more than nod at him or say *Good day, Mr. Strayhorn* if he forced the issue by tipping his hat or taking up so much sidewalk when she passed him that she couldn't pretend he wasn't there. *Mr. Strayhorn*, and he been knowing her, Freeda Hollinger before she was Freeda French, for as long as she was big enough to walk the streets of Homewood. But he understood and hadn't ever minded till just this morning standing in the ankle deep snow drifted up against the three back steps of John French's house next to the vacant lot on Cassina Way, till just this moment when for the first time in his life he thought this woman might have something to give him, to tell him. Since she was a mother she would know what to do with the dead baby. He could unburden himself and she could touch him with one of her slim, white-woman's hands, and even if she still called him *Mr. Strayhorn*, it would be all right. A little woman like that. Little hands like that doing what his hands couldn't do. His scavenging, hard hands that had been everywhere, touched everything. He wished Freeda French had come to the door. Wished he was not still standing tongue-tied and ignorant as the dog raising his hind leg and yellowing the snow under somebody's window across the way.

"Man supposed to pick me up first thing this morning. Want me to paper his whole downstairs. Seven, eight rooms and hallways and bathrooms. Big old house up on Thomas Boulevard across from the park. Packed my tools and dragged my behind through all this snow and don't you know that white bastard ain't never showed. Strayhorn, I'm evil this morning."

Strayhorn had found John French in the Bucket of Blood drinking a glass of red wine. Eleven o'clock already and Strayhorn hadn't wanted to be away so long. Leaving the baby alone in that empty ice-box of a shack was almost as bad as stuffing it in a garbage can. Didn't matter whose it was, or how dead it was, it was something besides dead now that he had found it and rescued it and laid it wrapped in the sweater on the stack of mattresses where he slept. The baby was sleeping there now. It was waiting for the right thing to be done. It was owed something and Strayhorn knew he had to see to it that the debt was paid. Except he couldn't do it alone. Couldn't return thru all that snow, and shove open the door, and do what had to be done by himself.

"Be making me some good money soon's I catch up with that pecker wood. And I'm gone spend me some of it today. Won't be a better day soon for spending it. Cold and nasty as it be outside, I don't reckon I be straying too far from this stool till it's time for me to go home to bed.

McKinley, give his whatchamacallit a taste. And don't you be rolling your bubble eyes at me. I tolt you I got me a big money job soon's I catch that white man."

"Seems like you do more chasing than catching."

"Seems like you do more talking than pouring, nigger. Get your pop-eyed self on over here and fill us some glasses."

"I been looking for you all morning, man."

"I guess you found me. But you ain't found no money if that's what you was looking for."

"Naw. It ain't that, man. It's something else."

"Somebody after you again? You been messing with somebody's woman? If you been stealin again or Oliver Edwards is after you again . . ."

"Naw, naw . . . nothing like that."

"Then it must be the Hell Hound hisself on your tail cause you look scared to death."

"French, I found a dead baby this morning."

"What you say!"

"Shhh. Don't be shouting. This ain't none of McKinley's or nobody else's business. Listen to what I'm telling you and don't make no fuss. I found a baby. All wrapped up in newspaper and frozen stiff as a board. Somebody put it in a box and threw the box in the trash back of Dumferline."

"Ain't nobody could do that. Ain't nobody done nothing like that."

"I don't believe it neither. But it's the God awful truth. Me and Daddy Garbage was on our way this morning up the alley. The dog, he found it. Turned over a can and the box fell out. I almost kicked it, John French. Almost kicked the pitiful thing."

"And it was dead when you found it."

"Dead as this glass."

"What did you do?"

"Couldn't leave it there. I didn't know what to do so I took it on back to my place."

"Then what?"

"I left it. What else I'm gone do?"

"Frozen dead."

"Laid there in the garbage like it wasn't nothing but spoilt meat."

"Goddamn. Goddamn, man. You sure you seen it, ain't you? God bless America. I know you did. Can look at you and know it. . . . McKinley. . . . Bring us a bottle. That's right. And I mean gin not wine. You got my tools to hold so just get a bottle on over here and don't say a mumbling word."

Lisabeth is singing to the snowman she has constructed on the vacant lot next door to her home. The wind is still and the big flakes are falling again straight down and she interrupts her slow song to catch snow on her tongue. Other kids had been out earlier, spoiling the perfect whiteness of the lot, but they had left a mound of snow she used to start her snowman. The mound might have been a snow man before. A tall one, even taller than any she could build because there had been yelling and squealing since early in the morning which meant a whole bunch of kids out on the vacant lot and meant they had probably worked together making a giant till one or the

other got crazy or evil and smacked the snow man and then the others would join in and snow flying everywhere and the snowman plowed down as they scuffled on top of him and threw lumps of him at each other. Then they'd calm down and start again. She could see bare furrows where they must have been rolling big snow balls for heads and bodies. Her mother had said: "Wait till some of those rough necks go on about their business. Probably nothing but boys out there anyway." So she had rid up the table and scrubbed her Daddy's eggy plate and sat in his soft chair dreaming of the kind of clean, perfect snow she knew she wouldn't see by the time she was allowed out; dreaming of a ride on her Daddy's shoulders to Bruston Hill and he would carry her and the sled he had made to a quiet place not too high up the slope and she would wait till he was at the bottom again and clapping his hands and shouting up at her: "Go, go little gal."

"If you go the police they find some reason to put you in jail. Hospital ain't got room for the sick let alone the dead. Undertaker, he's gone want money from somebody before he touch it. The church. Them church peoples got troubles enough of they own to cry about. And they be asking as many questions as the police. It can't stay here and we can't take it back."

"That's what I know, John French. That's what I told you."

Between them the flame of the kerosene lamp shivers as if the cold has penetrated deep into its blue heart. Strayhorn's windowless shack is always dark except where light seeps through cracks between the boards, cracks which now moan or squeeze the wind into shrill whistles. The two men sit on wooden crates whose slats have been reinforced by stone blocks placed under them. Another crate, shortside down, supports the kerosene lamp. John French peers over Strayhorn's shoulder into the dark corner where he knows Strayhorn has his bed of stacked mattresses.

"We got to bury it, man. We got to go out in this goddamn weather and bury it. Not in nobody's back yard neither. Got to go on up to the burying ground where the rest of the dead niggers is." As soon as he finished speaking John French realized he didn't know if the corpse was black or white. Being in Homewood, back of Dumferline wouldn't be anything but a black baby, he had assumed. Yet who in Homewood would have thrown it there? Not even those down home, country negroes behind Dumferline in that alley that didn't even have a name would do something like that. Nobody he knew. Nobody he had ever heard of. Except maybe crackers who could do anything to niggers, man, woman or child don't make no difference.

Daddy Garbage, snoring, and farting ever so often, lay next to the dead fireplace. Beyond him in deep shadow was the child. John French thought about going to look at it. Thought about standing up and crossing the dirt floor and laying open the sweater Strayhorn said he wrapped it in. His sweater. His goddamn hunting sweater come to this. He thought about taking the lamp into the dark corner and undoing newspapers and placing the light over the body. But more wine then he could remember

and half a bottle of gin hadn't made him ready for that. What did it matter? Black or white. Boy or girl. A mongrel made by niggers tipping in white folks' beds or white folks paying visits to black. Everybody knew it was happening every night. Homewood people every color in the rainbow and they talking about white people and black people like there's a brick wall between them and don't nobody know how to get over.

"You looked at it, Strayhorn."

"Just a little bitty thing. Wasn't no need to look hard to know it was dead."

"I can't figure how somebody could do it. Times is hard and all that, but how somebody gone to be so cold?"

"Times is surely hard. I'm out there every day scuffling and I can tell you how hard they is."

"But I don't care how hard they get. Some things people just ain't supposed to do. If that hound of yours take up and die all the sudden, I know you'd find a way to put him in the ground."

"You're right about that. Simple and ungrateful as he is, I won't be throwing him in nobody's trash."

"Well, you see what I mean then. Something is happening to people. I mean times was bad down home too. Didn't get cold as this too often, but the cracker could just about break your neck with his foot always on it. I mean I remember my Daddy come home with half a pail of guts one Christmas eve after he work all day killing hogs for the white man. Half a pail of guts is all he had and six of us pickaninnies and my Mama and grandmama to feed. Crackers was mean as spit, but they didn't drive people to do what they do here in this city. Down home you knew people. And you knew your enemies. Getting so you can't trust a soul you see out here in the streets. White, black don't make no difference. Homewood is changing . . . people is changing."

"I ain't got nothing. Probably never will. But I lives good in the summer time and I always finds a way to get through winter. Can get me a woman when I needs one. And there always be children around to play with, even if they ain't mine."

"You crazy, all right, but you ain't evil crazy like people getting. You got your cart and that dog and this place to sleep. And you ain't going to hurt nobody to get more. That's what I mean. People ready to do anything to get more than what they have."

"Niggers been fighting and fussing since they got on earth."

"I don't mean fighting. Everybody gone to fight at one time or another. I done fought half the niggers in Homewood, myself. Fighting is different. Long as two men stand up and beat on each other ain't nobody else's business. Fighting ain't gone hurt nobody. Even if it kill a nigger every now and then."

"John French, you don't make no sense."

"If I make no sense out of no sense, I be making sense."

"Here you go talking crazy. Gin talk."

"Ain't no gin talking. It's me talking and I'm talking true."

"What we going to do?"

"You got a shovel round here?"

"I got a broken-handled piece of one."

"Well get it, and let's go on and do what we have to do."

"It ain't dark enough yet."

"How you tell how dark it is outside?"

"I know. I been living here long enough to know."

John French reaches down to the bottle beside his leg. The small movement is enough to warn him how difficult it will be to rise from the box. Nearly as cold inside as out and the chill is under his clothes, has packed his bones in ice, and the stiffness always in the small of his back from bending then reaching high to hang wallpaper is a little hard ball he will have to stretch out inch by painful inch when he stands. His hand closes on the neck of the bottle. In his fist he raises it to his lips and drinks deeply before passing the bottle to Strayhorn. The gin is hot in John French's mouth. He holds it there, numbing his lips and gums, inhaling the fumes. For a moment he feels as if his head is a balloon and someone is pumping it full of gas and there is a moment when the balloon is either going to burst or float up from his shoulders.

"It's gone. You didn't save me but a swallow." Strayhorn is talking with his mouth half covered by coatsleeve.

"Then let's go on back to McKinley's. Be two, three hours before it's good and dark. I sure ain't sitting here that long. Ain't you got no wood for that fire?"

"I'm saving it."

"Let's go then."

"I think I ought to stay. Somebody ought to be here."

"I'll go and bring us something back, then."

"If that's what you want to do. But now I'm here, I think I ought to stay."

When John French wrestles open the door, the grey light enters like a hand and grasps everything within the shack, shaking it, choking it before the door slams and severs the grey hand at the wrist.

It is the hottest time of a July day. Daddy Garbage is curled beneath the big wheeled cart, smug, regal in the only spot of shade on the street at one o'clock in the afternoon. Every once in awhile his ropy tail slaps at the pavement. Too old for most of his puppy tricks but still a puppy when he sleeps, Strayhorn thinks, watching the tail rise up and flop down as if it is measuring some irregular but persistent pulse running beneath the streets of Homewood.

"Mr. Strayhorn." The young woman speaking to him has John French's long, pale face. She is big and raw-boned like him and has his straight, good hair. Or the straight, good hair John French used to have. Hers is almost to her shoulders but his is long gone, a narrow fringe above his ears like somebody had roughed in a line for a saw cut.

"Have you seen my daddy, Mr. Strayhorn?"

"He was by here yesterday, Miss French."

"Today, have you seen him today?"

"Hmmm . . ."

"Mr. Strayhorn, he has to come home. He's needed at home right away."

"Well now . . . let me see . . ."

"Is he gambling? Are they gambling up there beside the tracks? You know if they're up there."

"Seems like I might have seen him with a few of the fellows . . ."

"Dammit, Mr. Strayhorn. Lisabeth is going to have her baby. Do you understand? Its time, and we need him home."

"Don't fret, little gal. I bet he's up there. You go on home. Me and Daddy Garbage get him. You go on home."

"Nigger gal, nigger gal. Daddy's sure nough fine sweet little nigger gal." Lisabeth hears the singing coming closer and closer. Yes, it's him. Who else but him? She is crying. Pain and happiness. They brought the baby in for her to see. A beautiful, beautiful little boy. Now Lisabeth is alone again. Weak and pained. She feels she is in the wrong place. She was so big and now she can barely find herself in the immense whiteness of the bed. Only the pain assures her she has not disappeared altogether. The perfect white pain.

She is sweating and wishing for a comb even though she knows she would not try to sit up and untangle the mess of her hair. Her long, straight hair. Like her mother's. Her Daddy's. Dark hair raveled on the pillow beside her face. She is sweating and crying and they've taken away her baby. She listens for footsteps, for sounds from the other beds in the ward. So many swollen bellies, so many white sheets and names she forgets and is too shy to ask again. And where have they taken him? Why is no one around to tell her what she needs to know? She listens to the silence and listens and then there is his singing, *Nigger gal. Sweet, sweet little nigger gal.* Her Daddy's drunken singing floating towards her and a nurse's voice saying *no*, saying *you can't go in there* but her Daddy never missing a note and she can see the nurse in her perfect white and her Daddy never even looking at her just weaving past the uniform and strutting past the other beds and getting closer and singing, singing an ignorant, darky song that embarrasses her so and singing that nasty word which makes her want to hide under the sheets. But it's him and he'll be beside her and he'll reach down out of the song and touch her wet forehead and his hand will be cool and she'll smell the sweet wine on his breath and she is singing silently to herself what she has always called him, always will, *Daddy John, Daddy John*, in time to the nigger song he chants loud enough for the world to hear.

"We got to say something. You're the one likes to talk. You're the one good with words." John French and Lemuel Strayhorn have been working for hours. Behind them, below them, the streets of Homewood are deserted, empty and still as if black people in the South hadn't yet heard of mills and mines and freedom, hadn't heard the rumors and the tall tales, hadn't wrapped packages and stuffed cardboard suitcases with everything they could move and boarded trains North. Empty and still as if every living thing had fled from the blizzard, the snow which will never stop, which will bury Dumferline, Tioga, Hamilton, Kelley, Cassina, Allequippa, all the Homewood streets disappearing silently, swiftly as the

footprints of the two men climbing Bruston Hill. John French first, leaning on the busted shovel like it's a cane, stabbing the metal blade into the snow so it clangs against the pavement to pace their march. Strayhorn next, tottering unsteadily because he clutches the bundle of rags and paper with both hands against his middle, thinking, when the wind gives him peace enough, of what he will say if someone stops him and asks him what he is carrying. Finally, the dog, Daddy Garbage, trotting in a line straighter than usual, a line he doesn't waver from even though a cat, unseen, hissed once as the procession mounted higher towards the burying ground.

In spite of wind and snow and bitter cold, the men are flushed and hot inside their clothes. If you were more than a few feet away, you couldn't see them digging. Too much blowing snow, the night too black. But a block away you would have heard them fighting the frozen earth, cursing and huffing and groaning as they take turns with the short handled shovel. They had decided before they began that the hole had to be deep, six feet deep at least. If you had been close enough and watched them the whole time, you would have seen how it finally got deep enough so that one man disappeared with the tool while the other sat exhausted in the snow at the edge of the pit waiting his turn. You would have seen the dark green bottle emptied and shoved neck first like a miniature headstone in the snow. You would have seen how one pecked at the stone hard ground while the other weaved around the mound of snow and dirt, blowing on his fingers and stomping his feet, making tracks as random as those of Daddy Garbage in the untouched snow of the cemetery . . .

"Don't have no stone to mark this place. And we don't know your name, child. Don't know who brought you on this earth. But we have buried children before. I buried my twins in this very place. And cried here for them. Can't think of nothing to say except they was born and died so fast nobody didn't get to know who they was neither. But we loved them. Hadn't even given one a name before she was gone. The other was John, he had my name.

"Like the preachers say, May your soul rest in peace. Sleep in peace, child."

Strayhorn stands mute with the bundle in his arms. John French blinks the heavy snowflakes from his lashes. He hears Strayhorn grunt *amen* then Strayhorn is like a figure seen under water. The outline of his shape wiggles, dissolves, the hard lines of him swell and divide.

"How we gonna put it down there? Can't just pitch it down on that hard ground."

John French pulls the big, red-plaid snot rag from his back pocket. He had forgotten about it all this time. He wipes his eyes and blows his nose. He stares up into the sky. The snow flakes all seem to be slanting from one spot high over his head. If he could get his thumb up there or jam in the handkerchief, he could stop it. The sky would clear, they would be able to see the stars.

He kneels at the edge of the hole and pushes clean snow into the blackness. He pushes till the bottom of the pit is lined with soft, glowing fur.

"The best we can do. Drop her easy now. Lean over as far as you can and drop her easy. . . ." □

The Viet Cong Love of Sgt. Donnie T. Bobo



Roy Behrens

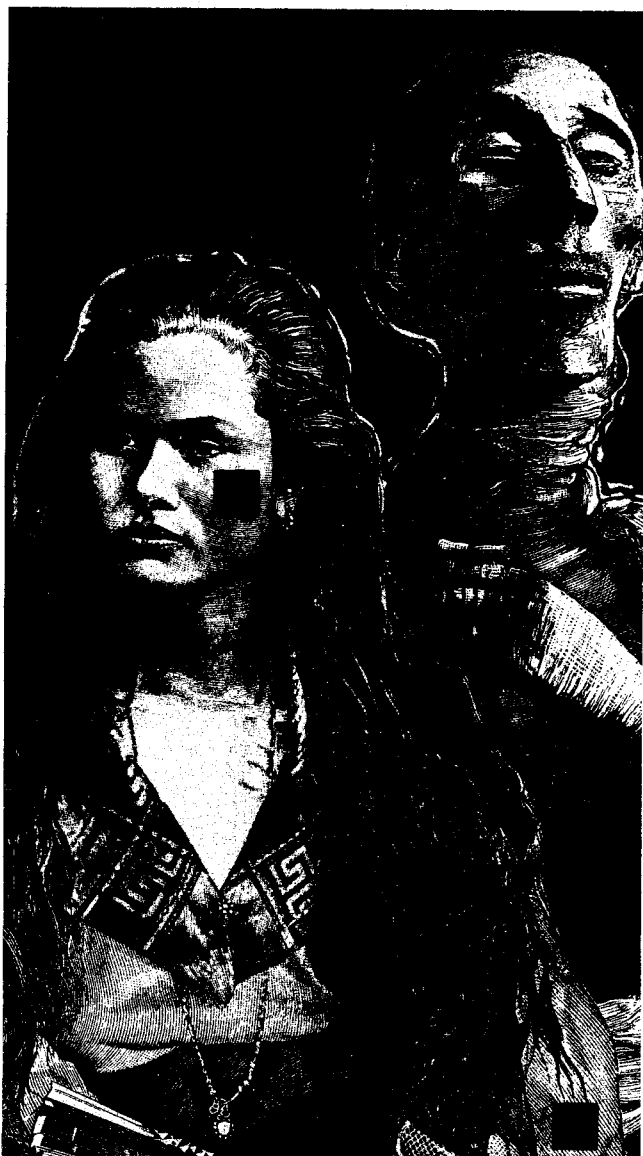
The way it worked in MR 2, up around Ban Me Thuot, near National Highway 14, was the usual:

I found the hole first, it being dug near the base of a wretched looking Cay-dai tree and not well-camouflaged at all; and then Donnie T. came over, took a quick look-see and squatted down, his face the picture of cunning and eagerness. You could tell this was his favorite part.

"Here's the truth of it," he began, doffing his steel pot and shooin' mosquitoes. "Up here, in the sunshine and fresh air, feeling good about himself and his job, which is tunnel-ratting, is me, Sgt. Donald Theodore Bobo of Prairie Grove, Arkansas, U.S. of A. and home of the fighting Squirrels. And down there in that stinky spider hole full of snakes and corruption and other foulness is you, Mr. Charles Cong."

In the nine months we were there, he always started this way, praising Mr. Charles as a worthy adversary and a gentlemen, then introducing me, PFC Leon Busby, also a Fighting Squirrel, and saying that we were the Batman and Robin of tunnel rats, unlickable and mighty. It was a dandy speech, and an impressive history. Donnie T. would say that we were an Unvanquished Team, having gone to the same elementary and Junior High, having played in the same backfield (Donnie T. as the QB, me as a wingback), and having come within an "I do" of marrying twin sisters named Bonnie and Connie Suggs before coming to our senses and enlisting on January 18 of nine-

LEE K. ABBOTT has had other stories recently in the OHIO REVIEW, EPOCH, and KANSAS QUARTERLY.



teen and sixty-seven. Sometimes, he'd even recite a poem, his favorite being the specialty of the Light Crust Dough Boys and Senator Bud "Pappy" O'Dell. This went: "I have a mother. I had to have. I love her whether she's good or bad. I love her whether she's live or dead. Whether she's an angel or an old dope head."

Then he'd relax while our translator, an ARVN cowboy named Duc Lap, chittered into that hole like a frightened monkey.

"War's a rotten thing," Donnie T.'d say, going on about how much him and me were enjoying our stay in Vietnam, and how we truly appreciated the hospitality of the friendly Yellow People, and how we'd been to all the good places like the White Rat, and how we particularly enjoyed seeing Mr. Bob Hope every year, but that if he, meaning Mr. Cong, didn't come out of his hole pretty soon, we'd be forced to blow his rice-sucking face off, etc. It was positively lyrical.

And then, likely as not, we'd sit a while, Donnie T. slurping at a can of C-ration cling peaches, me doing fanny bump exercises, and Duc Lap looking to us for guidance and compliments. Oh, these were lovely times—the heat

heavy and lazy-feeling, the jungle steaming, bugs buzzing, and us at the apex of our youth, so to speak. Maybe an hour would pass before you'd hear Mister Charles.

"Eat bees, Soldier Boy," he'd say. (You got to take my word for it; I never cottoned on to the lingo.) Anyway, Duc Lap would go stiff with fright (and usually faint dead away), and I'd roll into my mean-ass Combat Position and Donnie T.'d glow with smugness and self-esteem. It was, you can be sure, a joyous moment in the annals of war.

"You come on outta there," Donnie T.'d yell in Cong-talk. And more: "Chung ting bubba rubba dam doo," which didn't mean a thing but was intended to convey fear and extreme seriousness.

Sure, there'd be some whining and such from Mr. Charles, maybe a burst of Commie automatic fire. But soon enough there he'd be, flushed by guilt and defeat and doom, his face a glaze of sweat and grime, and not a shot fired by yours truly.

But this was all before Donnie T. fell in love.

It was up in Hua Nghia Province, July 1968. By this time we had achieved a lofty reputation, having been responsible for the capture and confinement of forty-one sap-sucking Commies and the destruction of approximately three tons of war-making matériel (including a bike repair shop and two Vespa motor scooters and a volume of nasty French literature); so two mucky-mucks from MACV were trucked in to watch us do our stuff on this local Charles (named the Prince of Darkness on account of his ability to make evil out of our good intentions). You can imagine our shock when Charles turned out to be a girl.

The day was a scorcher, I remember, so we were dressed accordingly—Bermuda shorts, cotton polo shirts with the teeny alligator on the chest, and ventilated golf hats like Hubie Green uses. (Because of our fame, you see, we were extended certain courtesies like being able to go down to China Beach to raid the skivvy houses.) Anyway, after the Brass got settled on their specially built viewing platform, Donnie T. went to work at this black hole dug into the side of a hill, sweet talking and bullying.

But it was no good, and after an hour you could see the panic set in, etc. We were dry-mouthed. We tried it all that day—the appeal to Charles' vanity, the tug at the heartstrings, threats against his physical well-being, insulting his pedigree. I threw in some comments about the Catholics, letting him know I was sympathetic to the religious argument. Even Duc Lap stomped around a bit, yapping at some length about the Angry Mountain Gods, reunification of the Homeland, and blood-letting of every kind, finally giving up in a huff of outrage and sitting under a scrawny tree, sulking. Mortified, Donnie T. addressed the grumbling officers, apologizing for the delay. His body was a column of grief and confusion.

"What now?" I said. Duc Lap was sniveling openly, his shirt wet with slobber. "We don't get this bugger, somebody gonna fry our ass."

"Gut shot." His lips were white and pulpy. "No more Mr. Nice Guy."

In a second, Donnie T. had our ditty bag open and was hurling contraband into the hole, proven items of VC lure

like dirty pictures of Idaho girls with remarkable bosoms, and PX goodies like tape decks and Otis Redding records.

No effect. I was devastated. The Brass were like stone.

So, as a last resort, Donnie T. began revealing his personal history. It was a humiliating two hours.

"I have stolen," Donnie T. screeched into that hole. He was a desperate man, all right, his face puffy and sweating like a wheel of cheese. "I have dressed up in girl's panties and had lewd thoughts about my mother. I have masturbated and picked my nose and lit my farts with kitchen matches. I have been covetous and deceitful and petty with my betters."

On and on he went, telling how him and me swam naked in the flumes and how we broke and entered Old Lady Sweem's house and how we lost our cherries to the same girl (Betty Lou Greathouse), even telling about the time we skipped school and drove down to Little Rock, got a room at the Motel Six, and paid twenty dollars each for some State Avenue white trash to go round the world and the thrill of it.

"I am a broke man," Donnie T. said by the end, his spirit gone. Duc Lap was up a tree, praying. Naturally, the Brass were impatient and bugged out before the climax.

"Come out," Donnie T. was blubbing. "Take your prize. You have whupped the best."

At this point, he was on his knees, bare-chested, limp with woe. For a second, there was nothing, only a jungle silence of heartbreak; then this weird ha-ha voice comes echoing out of the hole: "G.I. Joe, what a schmoel!"

It was here that Donnie T. lost his poise.

The next few minutes were a blur. All I remember is Donnie T. diving into the hole with a roar, his legs disappearing and the awfulest rumble of a fight.

"Git some!" I was hollering. "Take it to him, D.T. You're the one. Whip up, whip up!"

Then, there he was, dragging this Charles out—this girl—his face lit like a lamp with love.

For a month Donnie T. was useless, only laying in his cot weary and unrecovered. He had the morning and afternoon terrors, his mind on one thing: love. Duc Lap would come in with a sackful of Hamlet Reports, each polka-dotted with the sites of fresh Charles holes, including some of the most famous like the Tay Ninh Trigger and the three Leos from Cheo Reo.

"Upsy-daysie," Duc Lap would say. "You zap Cong today?"

"Aaarrggghh," Donnie T.'d moan, doubling up, cramped with love pains; and I'd swab his brow with a wet T-shirt.

Her name was Ting Nuh, but by the second week at Saigon Detention Center the spies were calling her Lucy. She was 18, an utter bombshell. The pictures started arriving almost immediately. There she was, in all her frail china doll beauty, in a snow-white interrogation room. Donnie T. perked up some when he saw those. "I'm dying, Leon," he told me one night, "Just wasting into everlasting nothingness."

Then the rumors hit: She was the daughter of one of the Eleven Old Men of the Hanoi Politburo; she was the niece of a French Sex Queen. It was the silliest stuff. The spooks weren't getting anywhere with her. They were battling Cong pride and centuries of distrust. Then, at last, came the word: the debriefing of Lucy would be done by Sgt. Donnie T. Bobo. They'd give him a whack at her, only fair.

"Hot shit!" Donnie T. hollered when he heard that, rising resurrected out of his funk.

A spade spy named Jackson flew us down incognito in Air America. We called him James Bond on account of his keen interest in disguise and backstabbing. James put us up at the Continental Hotel, later making us pretty at a dummy beauty parlor on Tu Do Street. Next day we went downtown—me as a correspondent, Duc Lap as a Jap Teenage Idol, and Donnie T. as a USIA missionary which allowed him to look crazy and driven and jittery (which he was).

For a long time, we just stood and watched through the one-way glass, Donnie T. wheezing with lust.

"Love is squeezing my heart," he kept saying over and over.

She was his type all right—skin like fine paper, and big eyes, not to mention a body like a poem. It was a wicked fifteen minutes.

Duc Lap wanted to lop off her humpers, make burger meat or some such. "I make her talk," he insisted. "Go boom in face, plenty true. Girl no match for number one evil killer. Jap Idol angry for chance. Time no impediment." You could tell he was a true patriot.

I was thinking about Betty Lou Greathouse and how in the 10th grade me and Donnie T. went over to her trailer. Her folks were out of town and she was hot for Donnie T., not me. I was just a tag along, good company and so forth. But Donnie T. wasn't having none of that. "You want me, you got to take Leon," he said. This had a real crushing effect on her. She was a Senior and old around the eyes and used to getting her way in affairs of the heart. "I'll have to think about it," she said, wandering back to the toilet to make up her mind. The place was all decorated in candles and velvet paintings of slick Mex matadors. Needless to say, my blood was up. Then she came back, toothpick stuck between her teeth, and said okay, which left me light-headed and sweaty. I followed her back to the bedroom which was also decorated: stuffed pandas and movie posters (which spoke of Tormented Passion and Love That Blinds). "Don't go nowheres, Donald," she yelled. I was on top of her by this time, pants and Jockey shorts at my ankles. She had her eyes closed and wasn't breathing much. You could tell she was enjoying it. When they were doing it, I sat in the living room and played Johnny Mathis records. Afterward, driving home in the pick-up, I was grateful. "Thanks," I said. Donnie T. gave my shoulder a big squeeze. "Ain't nothing," he said. That's the kind of guy he was.

"How you know it's love?" I said now. I was feeling jealous, us having been pals so long.

Donnie T. pointed to his temple, knees and chest. There was dizziness, weakness and furious thumping, respectively. I felt shameful.

That evening, James Bond took me and Duc Lap over to Mimi's Flamboyant where I got stupid on 33 beer. James told everyone that Duc Lap was a Rising Recording Star doing a tour of charity and goodwill. The ladies went loco trying to be friendly to him and toward midnight he got on stage to sing Country and Western. Duc Lap did his damndest to sound hurt and broken in despair, but you could see he was in his element, beer and closeness and willing women.

I passed out before he got to the part where the hero takes it in the ear.

For a week I saw little of Donnie T., but me and Duc Lap were making the rounds. James Bond was trotting us around like celebrities, even buying Duc Lap a purple and turquoise Cowboy outfit with hat and chaps. The notoriety just swelled and Duc Lap was spending every second crooning, standing in the limelight, and writing love lyrics. *Stars and Stripes* even did an interview, called him the slope Hank Williams. After that, he was insufferable.

One night our paths crossed, Donnie T. and me. The change in him was remarkable. Hair cut and clean-shaven, he looked as wholesome as a tomato. You could see he wasn't getting any Intelligence out of Lucy.

"What say, D.T.?" I began. He was in the john, popping pimples in a fit of self-admiration. "Let's you and me go back to work, huh?"

He didn't say anything, just rubbed on a little Jade East and was gone. It was real grim.

Then, after two weeks, he surprised me.

It was late and I was asleep. Duc Lap was out being personable and noteworthy, posing for pictures and feeling grand. I was just the opposite: forlorn. I was dreaming of Donnie T. and me and fishing for carp in the Buffalo River. This was ages ago. We used to dig forts and tunnels in the sand bars, take a can of Sterno to bake beans, and sit around smoking Lucky Strikes and coughing. It was a youth dream, you know, brave and sentimental and lost. Then I felt this shaking.

There was Donnie T. and in the shadows a lurking figure I knew without seeing: Lucy.

"What'd you do?" I said.

Bribes had done the trick, he said. That and confusion and normal war mysteries had sprung her from the Detention Center.

"We're gonna get married," he said.

I pointed out the obvious: court martial, the stockade, misery, etc. It was like talking down a hole.

"I'm quitting," he said. "My fighting days are over."

It was early morning and a gorgeous moon was out, making me blue with homesickness.

"What about your Mom?" Donnie T.'s mom was real ugly, with all her brains in her chest, but real sweet and a charter subscriber to Art Thom's Rainbow Prayer.

"Regrettable," is what he said. "Now, come on, you're our best man."

"I ain't moving." Immediately Lucy began sobbing.

"What you mean?"

I reminded him of our plans. We were going to go

down to New Orleans, blow off steam and count our blessings, then head out to the oilfields of West Texas. I had an Uncle there who was a mudman. Me and Donnie were going to become rich, live in luxury, maybe buy a farm or a small city. It was the standard, uninspired hope.

"You're a fool," he said. "Now, shake a leg, Leon. We got a preacher already."

It was true, and twenty minutes later the three of us were standing in front of a Korean minister. He prayed, shook his fist over the happy couple, burped and it was done.

"Many happinesses," he said.

I was near tears. I could see my whole future going into the dumper.

Then the preacher's wife came out with a Black Market Polaroid and made us pose. "Birdie, birdie," she was saying.

Lucy looked radiant, and Donnie T. was, well, proud. He'd stolen a waiter's jacket from the Continental, so he looked real formal.

Then the camera went off like a phosphorus gun, leaving me blind for an instant.

"Bye, bye," Donnie T. said, pumping my hand. It was the famous adiós scene, you know, the two of us being tough and realistic and so on. But I wasn't up to it.

"Look what you've done now," I was crying. "Where are you gonna go, D.T.? They're gonna have your balls for this. Where will you live? You're stupid, Donnie T., plain stupid. Look what kind of a fix you're in now!"

But he wasn't listening, so I slugged him. We tusseled for a minute but he was fighting for a higher passion. Eventually, he sat on my chest. My cheeks were slick with tears.

"Here," he said, "you keep the picture."

And they were gone on a Honda into the darkness, me holding a snapshot of—left to right—the Korean preacher, the lovers, and me. It was the worst moment in my life.

The Army was pissed, of course, losing a bona fide source of information and its number one tunnel rat, but took most of its displeasure out on Duc Lap. It was sad, him going from Entertainment Personality to grunt soldier in a day. Last I saw of him, he was sitting on the back of a deuce-and-a-half with a bunch of turncoat Friendlies, looking woebegone and heading for some fearful spot like Hue, some place full of dread and terror where he was sure to get a chest wound as a reward.

James Bond, he drilled me, but I pleaded innocence and apathy. "I don't know anything," I said. "Ain't no friend of mine." It was a touching lie which James saw through and sent me back to coaxing bad guys out of holes. But all my enthusiasm was gone.

I'd sit over those holes just like Donnie T., offering my advice and wisdom to those inside. This'd go on for hours. I'd speak to themes of mutual interest, like survival and valor, etc., maybe sing a bit from Uncle Roy and his Red Creek Wranglers. After a while, I'd just give up, pop in some CS gas, would snooze by some likely spot, then leg it back to my CO with another story of trying and failing.

Finally, Uncle Sugar saw the light and sent me back to the World.

Upon my return, I was uncontrollable, full of private crud and mean thoughts.

I went down to New Orleans, but without Donnie T. it just wasn't the party I'd planned on. Went to Texas, too, but the luxury was all gone before I got there. So, about the time the war stopped, I came back here, to Prairie Grove to work in the Purina store.

I see Donnie T.'s Mom at the Kroger every now and again. Each time she looks uglier, naturally blaming me and the Pentagon for the loss of her boy. One time she came at me with a box of Tide and a can of solvent, her face gleaming with anger, her coat flying like a cape. "Where's my Donnie!" she shrieked, chasing me down the condiments aisle, her ruckus the focus of attention. "You!" she hollered. "Leon Busby, you coward. You let my Donald down."

I used to mind, but not anymore, especially now that I've got a love of my own. You guessed it: Betty Lou Greathouse.

Here's how it happened:

I got a postcard from Paris, France. From Mr. and Mrs. D.T. Bobo. It was full of gleeful news. Lucy and Donnie T. had two kids, Leon and Busby, all with Cong middle names. They were living in Ho Chi Minh City, escorting newsmen and making themselves useful to the new order. He was hoping life was good to me as it had been generous to him and his. Then he said: "Love has turned me around. You should turn too."

Last night, I did. I went down to the Creole Palace and worked up a whiskey frenzy, harmonizing with the band, shooting bumper pool. Everybody was smiling and taking me into their hearts. Then I grew horny and lonely and wet-eyed, and went outside to collect myself. Some minutes later I was sitting on the cement steps of Betty Lou's trailer. Nothing could have worked out finer: it turned out she was lonely too.

"Here's the truth of it," I began, telling her the whole story. To avoid embarrassing myself, I just pretended I was speaking to a tree stump or a charred hooch and that Duc Lap was translating.

Then the door opened. It was a classic moment. She was wearing a nightie and you could tell the years had been good to her.

"Come inside," she said, which almost made me explode.

The velvet paintings were still there, along with some driftwood and glass doo-dads and curios.

For a long time, we didn't do anything, just lay there on her bedspread, it being an awkward situation. Then we kissed, tender-like, and I felt a liquid warmth in my chest and went for her with a whoop. She reciprocated, whooping too. Oh, it was superior, the two of us moaning, me being sloppy and Betty Lou taking me to her chest with a sigh; and by morning, there I was, tired, planning and making promises.

Some of us take a long time to learn something. Others a short time.

Donnie T. knew that. I know it now. □

RITA DOVE

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

Darling, the plates have been cleared away,
the servants are in their quarters.

What lies will we lie down with tonight?
The rabbit pounding in your heart, my

child legs, pale from a life of petticoats?
My father would not have had it otherwise
when he trudged the road home with our souvenirs.
You are so handsome it eats my heart away . . .

Beast, when you lay stupid with grief
at my feet, I was too young to see anything
die. Outside, the rose bushes are folding
lip upon red lip. I miss my sisters—

they are standing before their clouded mirrors.
Gray animals are circling under the windows.
Sisters, don't you see what will snatch you up—
the expected, the handsome, the one who needs us?

Your mother has been institutionalized for her own safety." The doctor makes this pronouncement as if it is routine. It comes up a thousand times, that phrase: *for her own safety*. I have heard that the majority of patients in this hospital are women. Women in suspiciously plain clothes and in green hospital gowns prowl the grounds outside. Women with wild hair and eyes, women who stare at their feet as they walk, who shy away from inanimate objects: trees, benches.

"What was she doing that was dangerous?" I ask.

"You don't know anything?" the doctor says. "Well, there were two dangerous, unhealthy aspects to her behavior. Things that might have killed her if she'd kept on." He looks to the right of me as he speaks.

"She must have stopped using the bathroom about three weeks before we found her. Urine and excrement were spattered through the house, smeared on the walls, stockpiled in corners of rooms . . . she'd catch it in pots and pans. This wouldn't have killed her, of course, not alone . . .

"Come with me," he says. "I'll show you."

The long hallway smells strongly of urine. "Horrible, isn't it?" he says. "These women, for some reason . . . they wet their beds. They don't seem to want to control any aspect of their bodily functions. It's a conscious thing, they know what they're doing. If we could have enough nurses . . ."

The doctor stops in front of a large window looking in on a room full of women, patients. "Play therapy," he explains. "It's a one-way window. We use it for observation.

"There's your mother."

I look in. The woman the doctor points to is covered with cuts, wounds, some small and scabbed over, some still bandaged, some long like knife slices. "What?" I say. "How. . .?" Nausea wells up into my throat. *Poor woman*, I find myself thinking, objectively. *That poor woman is my mother*, another voice speaks.

The doctor motions to me to follow him. He stops a nurse and tells her to prepare my mother for a visitor.

"Your mother," he says, "had been methodically perforating herself. A cut here today, a stab there tomorrow—anywhere she could reach. She was paring herself away. Killing herself in the slowest, most painful way she could imagine. Giving us plenty of time to stop her."

He stops in front of an elevator, reaches out to shake my hand. "Just thank God," he says. "Just thank God that her neighbor was attracted by the smell, and put an end to it in time. Only He knows what might have happened otherwise."

"They beat women here at night," my mother says. "I hear them moan; they scream."

This is her greeting. It escapes her lips almost before I sit down. "Please take me home," she says. Her hands fold themselves neatly, innocently on the gray coverlet over her lap. "I won't do it again."

"They tell me you can't be left alone," I say.

"You can stay with me," she says. She raises her hands

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inheritance

slowly, reaching toward me, but does not touch my face—as if protecting me, as if afraid. "You are my son."

Janine, facing me, wide awake, propping herself up. "What is it?" she asked, sensing alarm, meaning the phone call.

"My mother," I said.

"Which one?"

"My real mother."

Later, she came into the living room to say good-bye. We held each other, slow-danced across the floor. She said, "You do love her, don't you?"

"How can I love her? I've never known her."

"She's your mother, we all love our mothers."

"She gave birth to me," I said. "She's not really my mother. I happen to be responsible for her, but I can't love her."

"It's part of your responsibility to love her," Janine said, stroking my back. "It'll make things easier, she might get better."

"The only thing I can do," I said, kissing her forehead and letting her go, "is get her out of there. Then she has to be on her own."

Across from me at the table my mother sits stirring a cup of tea. She has been stirring this same cup of tea for ten minutes. It must be too cold to drink, too cold to have any benefits as tea, but somehow the simple stirring of it seems therapeutic, seems to soothe her. I don't interrupt it. I don't dare. She watches the tea swirling around in the cup, watches her hand stirring, watches the spoon—like a baby fascinated with its own body, something new, a toy. And because I have to stay with her, take care of her, *keep an eye on her*, I watch her stir too. Finally she looks up.

"Cookie?" she says. This is part of it too, the offering of the cookie.

"They're stale," I say, pointing to the half-dozen cookies left on the plate at the center of the table.

"It's my fault," she says. "It's my fault."

"They've been out here for a week," I say, but she is looking past me out the window and doesn't seem to hear.

It is a gray day. It would help to turn some lights on in the house, but I don't want to stand up. Janine has taught me to turn my body into a weight, to rest, relax, remain immobile. By this method any chair, any position can be made comfortable. Even this hard-backed kitchen chair, with its dirty, sticky plastic upholstery, feels comfortable to me now. It's difficult to imagine moving.

"I wonder when your father will come?" she asks. I shake my head, meaning *I don't know*, but she isn't paying attention. Her eyes rest on her hands holding the teacup. She picks her hands up as if they are objects separate from her and examines them. A critical furrow appears between her eyes. From a pocket in her apron she extracts a tiny pair of nail scissors.

"Where the hell did you get those?" I scream and reach for them without thinking—the way a parent reaches for something dangerous to take from a child: an ant-covered popsicle stick being raised to the mouth, a pretty piece of broken glass. "Where . . . ?" She holds the scissors back from me, hides them in the palm of her hand pressed against her chest under the dingy flowered apron. "I will not let my nails go to hell as well," she says, defiant, putting her foot down. The nails begin to fall in yellow brittle bits onto the table, onto the floor, into the saucer under her teacup, now forgotten.

At last I stand, go into another room. Through the window I see the rectangle of lawn, thin-limbed trees like adolescent girls, a broken curbstone, the street puddled with the previous night's rain. I step out onto the porch, pulling the screen door closed behind me. Will my father come? We haven't heard from him, we don't know where he is.

I walk to the garage and slide the overhead door down to hide the accumulated bags of garbage, the old bicycle (mine? whose?), some cobwebbed rakes and hoes and shovels, and a gas can. I can remember the back yard when it was pruned, cultivated. Larger than the front, it is now full of gnats and bees flourishing in the weeds in the shade of the mimosa. The same wire fence is still there—sagging and rusty, but miraculously whole. That at least will not need repair.

Before they let my mother come home I had to clean the house. The smell of human waste was overwhelming.

I stood by the door without unlocking it and thought *is it worth it?* Finally I went inside, breathing through my mouth, tore up the bedsheets and soaked them in ammonia, swabbed the place down until the smell of *that* overcame me and I had to go outside or faint.

It is still the same house, the place where I was small, where I was a child, until it was decided that my parents couldn't take care of me. My foster parents love me, they send their concern to me now as always, a verbal package of love. They share my burden along with Janine, as much as they can without being here. *She's my mother*, I think. *Mine*.

I pick up a piece of rusty, unidentifiable metal that lies in the driveway and turn to look at the house. Its clapboard shows gray under curls of white paint. I add *painting* to my mental list. Turning toward the fence again, I see our neighbor, the woman who saved my mother's life.

"Hello," she says. We don't know one another's first names. "How are things?" she asks.

"All right," I say. "The same."

"Good," she says. "Can I do anything?"

"No, no, you've done enough. Everything's fine."

"Well then." She stops as if to say something more, something to the point, something crucial, like *what are you going to do with her?* but then she just says, "I'll see you. Call if you need anything."

"All right." I smile. "I will. If I do. Thanks. Thank you."

She smiles and waves and goes back to her white house with black shutters, everything neat and clean and in order. Her lawn is cropped short, is evenly bright green, like a golf course. They must hate living next to this, I think, looking around me. The piece of metal drags noisily on the driveway as I walk back to the house.

"Hello," she says, smiling as I come in. "Would you like a cookie now?"

I shake my head.

"What's new? Hear anything?"

"About what, Mother?"

"About your father?"

"No," I say. "Nothing's new."

It's been nearly two weeks. The search for some kind of maid, some kind of nurse, to stay with her looks hopeless. She needs some strong, loyal woman to watch over her. In this small town everyone knows about her, about the incident and its circumstances, and not many answer the ad I put in the paper. My mother's hands and arms are still festooned with bandages, her face is scarred and scabby. Meeting her, two applicants are scared away; a third says outright: "Your mother is a dangerous woman, I don't want her cutting me." It's a wonder anyone comes, the town being the way it is, cluttered and superstitious. I put an ad in the county paper. No one has answered yet.

Mother seems to subsist on the sugar in her tea. It keeps her belly from growling, she says. She vomits everything else. One morning I crack open an egg and inside

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is a partially developed embryo, bits of blood. I haven't eaten much since, either. I blame it on the local farms. My face in the bathroom mirror is still tan, should look healthy, but my eyes are bloodshot; there are bags under them. I sleep twelve hours in twenty-four. I keep my beard shaved to appear respectable to applicants, to the neighbor, to the doctor. My beard, her nails: it seems important to keep up appearances.

Janine calls.

"How's it going? Did you find anyone yet?"

"No. It's all right, I guess. I'm all right."

"When are you coming back?"

I grip the phone too tightly, raise my voice. "Look. I'm taking care of my mother. You wanted me to take care of my mother, right? I'll be back when I get back."

"Don't shout at me," she says. "I miss you."

On the day that I have been here exactly three weeks, a girl applies for the job and I hire her. Mulatto, twenty years old, accustomed to hard work—she looks strong and dependable, even a little pretty. I offer her more money than I mean to. "I had a year working in a mental hospital," she says. "Not —?" I ask, naming the local institution. She shakes her head. It is over in a remarkably short period of time. I introduce her to Mother.

"How do you do?" Mother says, nodding and smiling at the two of us. But she does not offer her hand.

The night before I am to leave my father calls. It is two or three in the morning and at first I think it is the alarm ringing, set to go off at dawn.

"Hello? Who is this?" my father's voice demands. I know who it is; I know immediately that it is my father and that he is drunk. I knew he would be drunk, I knew he would call—why else would I have moved the phone into my room? Now she will never know that he called. She didn't even hear the phone ring.

Father wants to say that he can't come. "I'm in Alaska," he says. He is too busy and too far away to come, but he'll send some money, he's making good money—he doesn't ask how much is needed, where to send it. He says, "Have you taken care of everything? Is she out of that place? They had me in there once to dry out, a place like that is hell. People screaming all night long. They beat patients, you know. What a mistake to get put in there." It does not sound as if he is in Alaska. It sounds as if he might be in a phone booth around the corner. I see my father in the phone booth, a pile of change in front of him, a brown-bagged bottle sitting on the shelf where the phone book would be if it had not been stolen. My father is a small man.

"Where are you?" I ask.

"Alaska," he says. "Didn't I tell you? The pipeline. Making a mint. I'll send your mother some money. I don't mean to shirk my responsibilities. A man has to live, you know? You were always like me, you know what I mean. A man has to live."

"She almost died," I say. "The neighbor saved her life."

"Well, thank God," Father says. "Thank God."

In the morning I write up some instructions and leave

them on the table, putting the edge of the plate over them so they won't blow away. I leave some money in an envelope. I feel hungry and eat a piece of bread which turns sweet in my mouth and reminds me of being a kid and eating white bread with butter and sugar on it. It must have happened in this house. My foster mother wouldn't allow it.

Mother is lying awake on her bed, on top of the sheets, dressed, motionless. "I've been thinking," she says, explaining herself.

"What about?" I sit on the edge of the bed and look at her.

"Your father."

We look away from each other, I at my hands, she toward the window. "What time is it?" she asks.

"Early, it's not even light."

"Do you remember your father?" she asks.

"Yes," I say. "Look, Mother, I'm going home today. Got to get back to work, you know." I try to smile, make it light. "The girl will be here at nine. Will you be all right until then?"

"What time is it now?" she asks.

I look at my watch. "Six," I say. "Looks like a nice day."

"I'll be all right," she says. "I wish this weather would break."

"It will." I stand. "I'll call you tonight, when I get home."

"Oh, it's all right, don't worry. Don't you be a worrywart. I'll be fine."

I bend over her and kiss her forehead. Her hands hover near my face, subside and fold themselves on her chest. "You don't look a bit like him," she says. "You resemble me."

"See you later," she calls as I leave the room. I turn and wave good-bye.

There is a line of blue on the horizon to the east. The weather might break after all. My car starts the first time. I breathe deeply: the smell of morning, the smell of exhaust. While I wait for the engine to warm up, I look at a map, glance up to see if my mother is watching. I would like to take a new way back, find some narrow twisting roads to distract me. But the way I came is the only direct connection between my mother's house and home, so I follow it again.

Half-asleep I slide my key into the lock. The apartment is dark and cool and smells of flowers. I drop my suitcases in the living room, reach through the bedroom door to turn on the light. "Don't," she says. I undress in the dark and get into bed beside her, gratefully hug her smooth back to me, and sleep.

When I dial the number after breakfast, no one answers. The nurse has taken her out for a walk, I think. Or something.

Later the phone rings on and on—still no answer.

I call the neighbor—who is always home, it seems—who says she will check the house and call me back.



K. Dyble Thompson

"Should I call the sheriff?" she asks, calling back.

"You can't get in?"

"No. Everything's locked."

"All right, call him."

At noon the sheriff calls. "There will have to be an autopsy, of course," he says, "but we think it was an overdose of sleeping pills."

"There weren't any sleeping pills in the house," I say automatically. "I checked the cupboards and drawers myself."

"As I say. An autopsy. She was lying on the bed. Maid apparently never showed. But you'll be glad to know that the house is neat as a pin this time. Will you be coming down to make arrangements?"

"Yes," I say, and hang up the phone.

Again I leave a message at my father's mother's house. As usual she says that she has no idea where he is, but she'll give him the message if he calls. "I'm sorry about your mother," she says. I try to reach him through the company he said he was working for. They've never heard of him.

Janine comes home still hot from rehearsal. We make love. Afterwards, in the warm, dim light, I lie looking up at the ceiling and say, "My mother is dead."

"Oh, my God," she says, stroking my hair. "Your poor mother. She must have been so miserable."

"You did everything you could," she says. She begins to knead the taut muscles in my shoulders. It hurts, I stop her hand. "She just wanted to die, that's the way some people are, that's the way they get to be," she says. "Feel how tight you are! Why don't you roll over, let me rub your shoulders."

"No," I say. "I have to go back. I just wanted to say good-bye to you."

"Oh." She stands and starts to dress. "Call me when you get there," she says, buttoning her blouse. "Call me at eleven every night; I'll be home."

Father reaches me at Mother's house, the morning I arrive. "I'm not working at the pipeline any more," he says. "They're laying off."

"Yes. Well, she's dead. She died of an overdose of sleeping pills."

"Sleeping pills. I'll send money for the expenses. I don't have much, but I'll send all I can. And, boy? Son? Don't be too sad about this, she wanted to die. She was an unhappy woman, your mother. It's probably for the best."

"Sure," I say.

The coffin is open; it is a quiet funeral in a smaller side-room of the funeral home. "He did a nice job," the woman from next door says. "You can't even see the scars. He made up her hands. She looks so *nice*." She says all this to her husband just loudly enough that I overhear. At the end of services at the cemetery, I shake her hand and her husband's and thank them for all of their help.

That night at Mother's house I dial Janine's number. The tape machine answers—her voice telling me to leave my name and number and a short message "at the tone." I hang up, sit for a while looking at the black squares of night through the window panes, at the table, at the chairs. My instructions are still there under the edge of the plate; the envelope with the money in it; the cookies. Her teacup is still in the sink where I put it the morning I left. Mother herself might still be upstairs on that bed, thinking—about my father, I suppose, all she ever really thought about.

If she had lived the cuts would have healed and the scars might have faded. By the time she was old, no one would have been able to tell. No one would have noticed. My children, her grandchildren, would not have needed to know. I know this is true. I cut my face this morning shaving for her funeral. I washed the blood down the sink and stuck a piece of toilet paper on the cut until it stopped bleeding. Tonight it has already healed.

I pick up the phone and dial Janine again, and this time I say: "I'm staying here for a while. Come if you want." No need to leave my name and number. Of course she won't come—how can she? Leave it all behind and come to me. If she loved me, I suppose. Then she might. □

UNCLASSIFIEDS

APPLES

HENRY BERRY

Cox's Orange Pippin, of course."

"Point!" said Clayton ("Clay") Pennyworth, holding up one finger to the scorekeeper.

It would take more than a Cox's Orange Pippin to fool Josh Bradley. Even though it tasted suspiciously like an Orleans Reinette, its nearly perfect blend of acidity and sweetness gave it away. Cox's Orange was not considered the favorite English dessert apple for nothing.

Josh took off his blindfold and smiled delightedly. He had made the finals. Along with Samuel Wright he had guessed in succession the Boston Russet, Lord Grosvenor, Michaelmas Red, Laxton's Reward, Reinette de Canada, D'Arcy Spice, and Merton Charm. The Cornish Gilliflower had stumped him and Josh sat nervously on the sidelines while Samuel Wright bit softly into a Pitmason Pine Apple and let its succulent juice seep into his taste-buds. Josh was noticeably relieved when Samuel, the only one giving him serious competition, had guessed "American Mother." It was an understandable miscalculation. The flesh of both apples is crisp and the juice bountiful and sweet. Samuel's mistake left Josh in the lead.

"Score?" inquired Josh.

Clay went over to the scorekeeper's table for consultation. "Fifteen-fourteen, you're ahead," he yelled back at Josh.

Josh took his place along the row of chairs set up for the contestants.

Samuel Wright was leaning against the wall, the front feet of his chair off the floor. He had white, bushy sideburns. The hair on the top of his head was thin. He was a large man, not easily identifiable as one versed in the subtleties and refinements of apple-tasting. He looked more like a lumberjack.

Josh, on the other hand, was spindly, and played the violin. It was not surprising that he was able to detect the various proportions of bitterness and

sweetness of the different, the multitude, of apples. It was not surprising that he was ahead.

Samuel pushed himself away from the wall. The chair came down with a thump and shivered beneath his heavy body. He rose wearily, as if annoyed that he would again have to go through the procedure of sitting down blindfolded and having a bite-size piece of apple brought out and set before him, of having to chew it slowly and discern the type of apple it was.

A Caville Blanche d'Hiver was brought out. The Blanche d'Hiver is often mentioned as being the most delicious of all apples, better even than Ashmead's Kernel. If Samuel guessed wrongly, at least he would be in for a treat. Blanche d'Hivers were like a rare and prized wine. They did not appear on the fruit counters of grocery stores or on the shelves of small markets on the sides of roads, but had to be imported from France. This particular Blanche d'Hiver had been ordered from Toulouse months earlier and carefully stored at the freezing point until the day of the contest. Then it had been brought out, just a couple of hours before it was scheduled to begin, and left in the air to regain its normal aroma and texture.

Samuel tapped in front of him until he discovered the small plate. Then he lifted the wedge of apple into his mouth. Biting into the apple was the most important part of the procedure. The quality of the flesh was important. It could be a degree of crisp or soft. Always, unless the apple were overripe or had been carelessly left at too high a temperature, it was firm. If Samuel bit down too forcefully, he would slice through the flesh as indiscriminantly as a cleaver, thereby damaging one clue to the type of apple. Also, a delicate pressure allowed the juice to

HENRY BERRY writes stories, poems, and essays from Southport, Connecticut.

ooze out slowly and not become too mixed with saliva. The flavor of the juice was the most important characteristic of the kind of apple. It would be a distinct blend of bitter and sweet. All apples have some tannic acid, but in many—dessert apples mostly—it is almost impossible to detect, outweighed by juice sweet as syrup. Bitterness is prized only in cider apples, and some cooking apples. Otherwise the degree of sweetness determines the apple's value as a handy, desirable, edible fruit.

Samuel brought his jaws together as carefully as calipers. With bits of the piece still in his mouth, he blurted out "Caville Blanche d'Hiver" confidently. His French was poor, but there was no mistaking that he was referring to the proper apple.

It was Josh's turn. He took the seat vacated by Samuel. For him, a Blenheim was brought out. During the nineteenth century, the Blenheim had been the most prized winter apple. Although it was not the most pleasant tasting, relatively acidic, it afforded the burghers and gentry its luxury throughout the year.

As soon as Josh bit into it, his face puckered. He narrowed it down to a Tom Putt, a Gravenstein, or Blenheim. Behind the blindfold, he closed his eyes and let his mind wander, hoping that it would seize upon the correct type. He narrowed it down to either a Tom Putt or Blenheim. It was too acidic for a Gravenstein. Josh was not certain which kind it was, but his chances were fifty-fifty. Luckily he could afford to lose a point and still be in contention against Samuel.

"Five seconds," Clay Pennyworth prompted.

Josh's mind raced. The first thought—*Blenheim*. "Blenheim," he said aloud just as time was running out.

"Point!" shouted Clay.

As early as 1741 apples of New England were being exported to the West Indies, and by 1759 Albemarle Pippins were sent from Virginia to England. There are instances where apples have been used as the medium of exchange. In 1649, Governor John Endicott of Plymouth traded William Trask five hundred apple trees of three years' growth for two hundred acres of land. The apple, as certainly as horses and molasses, accompanied early settlers and traders from Europe to the southern hemisphere and was carried from Europe or North America to India, China, and Japan, where orchards were planted when conditions, soil, rainfall, and temperature were favorable. No one knows precisely how long the apple has been a part of the human diet, but Cato names seven different varieties. This leads to speculation that the apple was introduced to the British Isles by the Romans. Most apples we eat today are domesticated versions of *Malus pumila*, the wild crab apple. Crab apple trees are still favored for aesthetic reasons. In the springtime cupped pink and white and violet blossoms line their boughs. But the crab apple itself proved too sour and bitter for the palate and today is used only for jellies and

preserves. Like the dog, apples were tamed and thus allowed to accompany man through history.

A Stayman Winesap was next. Samuel guessed it easily. Josh guessed a Nonpareil, but missed a Devonshire Quarrenden. After Samuel guessed a Granges Pearmain, the score was tied, seventeen all.

"Time out," called Clay. After two hours of apple-tasting, it was time to give both contestants and spectators a break. "Contest resumes in one hour."

This was the signal for the foodstuffs to be brought out. From the kitchen, hefty men carried jugs of cider and applejack and poured them into crystal bowls. Young girls followed bearing trays of tarts and apple strudel, mounds of applesauce, and dozens of apple pies. There was warm freshly baked bread for spicy apple butter and jams and jellies and preserves made especially for the occasion. There were whole apples, plump and red, shades of yellow and green, Grenadiers, Royal Russets, Autumn Pearmain, London Pippins, and Golden Reinettes among them.

So as not to befuddle their taste buds, Samuel and Josh didn't eat a thing. They sat talking to friends and relatives, watching everyone feast on the spread of apple products. At the end of the hour, Clay stood in the center of the room and announced the resumption of the contest. The men and girls cleared the tables and folded them up out of the way. Samuel and Josh came forward, indicating that they were ready. Clay sat them down and tied on their blindfolds.

"We have one more hour," said Clay, "and then the contest is over. In the event of a tie, you'll share the prize." The prize was a year's supply of apples sent to the home of the winner from all over the world. Each month he would receive one dozen of an exotic and unusual variety, some coming from as far away as Australia and the islands of Japan.

Clay waved his hand for the pieces to be brought out. For the finals, they would each have a bite of the same kind of apple and have to whisper its name to Clay. The first was a Court Pendu Plat, one of the oldest known kinds.

The Court Pendu Plat has been known for over four hundred years. As is the case with most apples, the origin of the name has been lost, but it is still exciting and elegant enough to fire the imagination. "Court Pendu Plat"—it is a richly flavored little dessert apple. One imagines instantly that kings of France must have demanded it as a treat for guests at state banquets. Courtiers must have been sent to the orchards of the south, near Bordeaux and Grenoble, with instructions to bid the farmers deliver their harvests to the palace by oxen and cart.

Samuel and Josh each guessed correctly, whispering softly into Clayton Pennyworth's ear so that the other, sitting but a few yards away, could not possibly hear. After the Court Pendu Plat, a Rome

Beauty was placed in front of the finalists. With little hesitation, they both named it, Clay having to hurry from one to the other as they raised their hands simultaneously. A Bramley's Seedling was next, followed by a King of the Pippins, then a Beauty of Bath, Lord Suffield, Arthur Turner, King's Acre Pippin, St. Edmund's Pippin, and a Lane's Prince Albert. The score stayed tied all the way; neither Josh nor Samuel missed once. Not a May Queen, a Coe's Golden Drop, not a White Transparent, nor a Christmas Pearmain, nor a Rosemary Russet were able to stump them.

"This is the last apple," Clay told the contestants and the crowd. "If you both guess it correctly, the prize will be mailed to each of you for six months."

White squares of apple flesh were placed in front of each of them. Josh found his first. He passed it under his nostrils and breathed in its delightful, heady fragrance. His face sparkled. He placed the piece in his mouth, closed his lips, and delicately crushed it. He smirked puckishly. A few seconds later he raised his hand. Clay went over and Josh whispered into his ear. Clay shook his head up and down, affirming that Josh had guessed rightly.

Samuel's face was dense with concentration. His brow furrowed and one sensed that, behind the blindfold, his eyes were narrow. His jaw revolved slowly as he let the small chunks of apple tumble over his tongue.

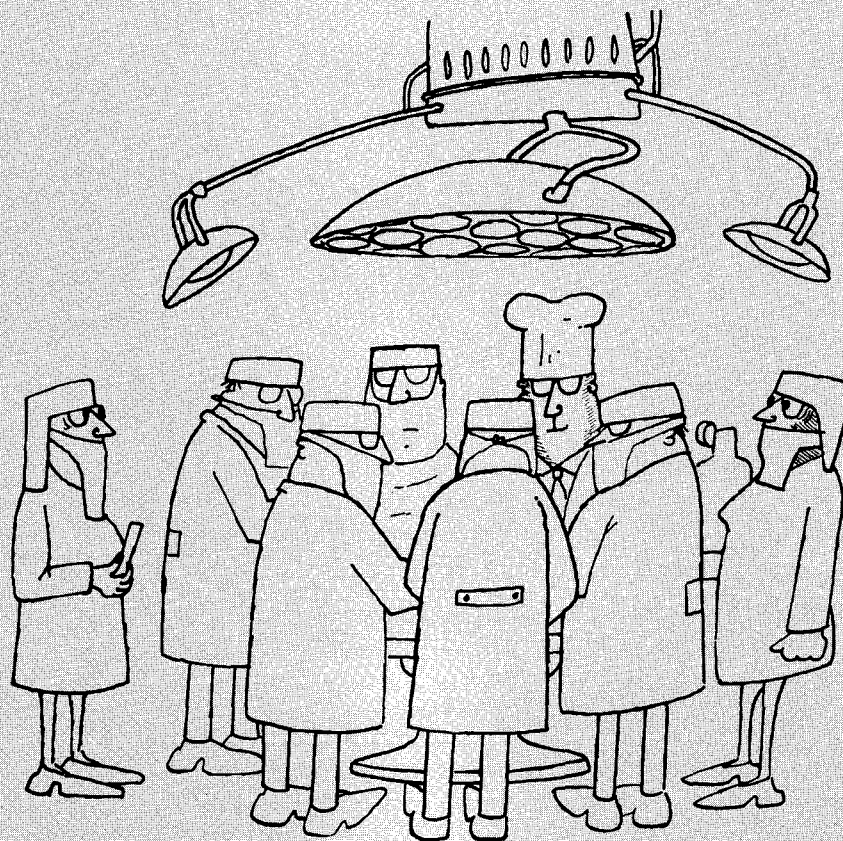
Clay looked over to the judges' bench, at the timekeeper. The timekeeper held up the fingers of both his hands. "Ten seconds," Clay relayed to Samuel.

Samuel's forehead turned glossy and his neck seemed to thicken as he strained to discern the type of apple he was chewing. "Five seconds," said Clay. "Three." "I don't know, I don't know," said Samuel. He removed his blindfold. At the other end of the table, Josh beamed proudly, winningly.

A cheer rose from the crowd as Josh got up, went over and shook hands with Samuel, and was led away toward the judges' table by Clay.

Samuel sat alone, dejected. The crowd passed by him, gathering around Clay and Josh and the judges. He looked disbelievingly at the sign on the table and the small piece of apple left on the plate in front of him. The apple was a Delicious, one of the most common apples, accounting for nearly twenty percent of the U.S. yearly crop. It was an apple any housewife or schoolboy would have known. He had never expected such a trick. It bordered on deceit.

As decorations, apples of all kinds had been hung from the ceiling by ribbons. One, red, round, and full, had worked its way loose and now it dropped. It struck Samuel on the head. Samuel looked at it. It was a Flower of Kent. A Flower of Kent, said to be the type Sir Isaac Newton observed falling. □



TINTINNABULATION (THE SOUND OF BELLS)

RICHARD ABRONS

Lydia's quirk is that she is very much taken with words—the sound of them, that is, not the meaning. At the dining table, for example, if asked if she wants more potatoes, she is apt to reply “Mesopotamia,” rolling the sound off her tongue with delight at having found just the right word-noise for that particular question, that particular moment. It is a quirk that, as a child, led her parents to believe that she was quite gifted, as her vocabulary was (and is) startling; and, if her choice of words was unusual, why, who could know what was simmering under those touching blond curls? Her teachers, too, taken with a response such as “rutabaga,” although the question might have been mathematical, regarded Lydia as a bright, but highly unusual, child.

As Lydia was transformed from a golden little girl into a colt legged, cavorting pre-pubescent, the all too often inappropriateness of her speech overcame the pride in her vocabulary and knowledge. In fact, there was doubt as to whether she knew what she was saying. Where once a firm “Agamemnon” might be greeted with something akin to awe, now she was questioned. Who was Agamemnon and what was he doing in the middle of a card game with her older brother, Charles? Mostly, Lydia would smile knowingly and not elucidate, so that it was unclear whether her thoughts had wandered to the siege of Troy, or whether she had simply warbled a meaningless chirp.

Obviously, this charming defect needed correction. Lydia was lectured on the importance—nay, the necessity—of correct communication, the purpose of language. How did *she* feel if she asked to be driven to her friend Margaret's, and her mother replied “travertine.” The problem was that Lydia was only partially attuned to the outside world. From the interstices of her inner space, recognizable words would emerge like melodies—expressive solely of the natural sounds of her personal terrain. A babbling brook, a caressing breeze, birds on branches, footsteps on the stairs, a jet plane overhead. The school psychologist made no dent. He concluded that Lydia was orally fixated due to premature weaning, and that she had schizophrenic tendencies, which could prove devastating later on. For the moment, she was happy but queer. Threats had a way of backfiring. She was once sent to her room for a “persnickety” that, after many tears, she

demonstrated was appropriately applied to Charles's habit of cutting the crusts off his bread. “I don't do that,” she said, “and I don't like crusts, either.”

The locus of this story is a small community in western Massachusetts, in the heart of the Berkshires—a town geared to the needs of skiers in the winter and campers and hikers in the summer. The town, in which Lydia's father owns a hardware store, is nondescript. But the surrounding hills, lakes and forests gladden the heart and quicken the spirit. To the burdened visitors from New York and Boston, it is a niche of Eden. To the locals, it is seedy but home, and they are at the same time proud of its appeal to outsiders and resentful of their intrusion—even though that is their livelihood.

Abetted by the tolerance and generosity of her teachers, Lydia graduated from high school. College, however, was out of the question. Furthermore, she had no such inclination, and her father was not that well off. Picture, then, an eighteen-year-old girl, slightly tall, slender, with chestnut hair falling below her shoulders. Her eyes are deep brown and wistful. Her delicate nose tilts up, an aristocratic feature belied by her direct and accepting smile. She clerks in her father's store, an engaging figure in jeans and blue shirt as she rings up the register and directs customers to nails, screws, light-bulbs and Scott's Turfbuilder. As she makes change, a shopper is surprised to hear her say “cacophony,” “anthropomorphic” or “Rumpelstiltskin.” If he or she inquires as to what was just said or why, Lydia does not respond. The sound is enough—a diminished seventh chord fading into nothing in the hardware store on Oak Street.

The young men of the town are attracted to Lydia. Her eccentricity is known and accepted. She feels warm and tender in their arms; and if, as lips approach lips, she says “Sisyphus,” that can be ignored and the contact enjoyed. On the other hand, who might want to marry her? Probably no young man with any sense of direction or purpose. Lydia's parents are worried about this. They scan the visitors to the resort for a potential mate of

RICHARD ABRONS is in the midst of writing his first novel.

passable quality—but with some vulnerability that makes him, too, doubtful merchandise. Lydia's father, however, is not overly defensive. He is a cynic who scorns the verbiage from the Pope, from Washington, even from his neighbors. "The New Deal," "The New Frontier," "The Great Society" are all hogwash. So is "How ya doin' Mac," "You look great," and "Nice day." How much worse could "bougainvillea" be—even if said while feeding the dog?

Where Lydia's mother would settle, therefore, her father would not. She invites for dinner Sidney Fowler, the son of the operator of the cafeteria at Brodie Mountain. Lydia is now almost nineteen. Sidney is twenty-two. He lisps. Perhaps, her mother thinks, the lisp is appropriate reparation. With Sidney, however, no reparation is needed. He talks non-stop. Breathing, it seems, is for him unnecessary. Occasionally, Lydia breaks in. "Promulgate," she says. "Cascade." "Mercenary." Sidney rushes past, noticing nothing, hearing nothing, saying everything. When he leaves, he compliments the dinner, and tells Lydia that he has enjoyed her company tremendously.

"I hope to thee you again thoon," he says at the door. "How about tomorrow night? There's a danthe at the lodge."

"Fulminate," Lydia says.

"Pick you up around theven?" he asks.

"That's fine," Lydia's mother says, before Lydia can form a meaningful sound.

Afterwards, there is an argument. Lydia's father says that Sidney is a jerk.

"He's not a jerk. He just talks a lot," says Lydia's mother. "Besides, who are we to be fussy?"

"We're parents of a lovely daughter, that's who we are," Lydia's dad says. "How could Lydia live with someone who never listens. He'd drive. . . ."

"Serendipity," Lydia interrupts.

And so it goes with several other handicapped young men. There is Clifford with a dangling right hand; Martin, who stutters; Victor, with a tic in his left eye; and Bennett, gaunt with a bobbing Adam's apple, who winks conspiratorially after almost every remark. All are invited to dinner. All receive the seal of approval (as well as pot roast and potato pancakes) from Lydia's mother. All are scorned by her father. All are of no account to the maiden in question. She—like so many daughters—wishes that her parents would just relax.

"Leave me alone," she says. "I'll get married when I want and to who I want. And if I don't get married ever, that's all right too."

"Not for me it isn't," her mother says.

"Don't worry," her father says. "We're not going to push anybody on you. And your room is always yours. You're our little girl forever and ever."

"Onomatopoeia," Lydia says gratefully.

Now you and I don't believe that for every girl there's some one boy somewhere and vice versa.

After all, why is it that the mate so often lives next door? And yet. . . .

And yet one fine August day, when a sudden thundershower has passed and the air is cool and clear, and the scent of honeysuckle mingles with the smell of barbecued steaks, and the squeals of children provide the evening's music, there is a knock on the door. Lydia opens it to find a young man standing outside. He is of medium height with light brown hair and blue eyes. He appears to be a man who states his case and leaves it at that.

"Can I use your phone?" he asks. "I'm sorry to bother you, but my car broke down and I have to call the garage."

"Of course," Lydia says. "My name is Lydia." She must have felt the warmth in his eyes or seen the sunlight in his hair, because that isn't like her.

"My name is Bruce," he says, and finds himself staring, which is not like him either. "Bruce Bailey."

"Euphonious," Lydia says. "A gaggle of geese. Tintinnabulation."

Bruce Bailey's face opens up like a Cheshire cat.

"Saturnine," he says. "Stiletto."

Lydia smiles and then laughs—the childish gurgle of delight and innocence.

"Crepuscular," she says.

"Epiphany," says Bruce.

"Vasco da Gama."

"Internecine."

Of course, Bruce Bailey stays for dinner. Lydia's parents have never seen her so alive and effervescent. And Bruce is a charmer. His parents have a summer home on Lake Meridian. He installs sprinkler systems on Long Island, but his heart is in these hills and streams and stands of birches. Every now and then, the conversation is interrupted.

"Rosicrucian," says Lydia.

"Cardiovascular," Bruce says.

"Insouciance."

"Sumptuary."

Lydia's father smiles at his wife and she smiles back. It is a happy meal.

"Smorgasbord," says her father, picking up the tune.

"Gramophone," says her mother.

Lydia and Bruce are now married and living in a small house not too far from the other side of Lake Meridian. Bruce works for a local sprinkler company. He is good at it—and a good salesman, too. He can show you in a whiffle how many zones you need to cover your lawn, and how your timer works so as to automatically do God's job at your discretion. Lydia clerks part time for her father. Their home is filled with the murmur of wind through the pines, the drill of the woodpecker, the croak of the bull-frog. Even their arguments—they do have them—are tonal.

"Avuncular," says Lydia angrily.

"Irascible," Bruce retorts.

When Lydia tells her parents that she is going to

have a baby, they feel blessed. Charles is living in San Francisco with a divorcee and her two children. Lydia is their pet, their fountain of joy.

"I do hope he's normal," Lydia's mother says, reaching for her needlework and her glasses.

"Who?" her father asks.

"The baby, of course," Lydia's mother says.

"Normal? What's normal!" exclaims Lydia's father. "Normal is Johnny Grant killing his old man. Normal is that Hatch kid caught stealing in Nelson's Drug Store. Normal is the Wilsons—separating now

and squabbling over their kids. Normal is Frank Marcy coming to the store and acting so high and mighty just because he runs the bank. Normal is your friend Daisy Selfridge getting her kicks by going around suffering in public. Thank the Lord, Lydia is not normal!"

"Oh stop it, George," Lydia's mother says. "You know what I mean."

"I do. I do indeed," says George.

"Perambulator," he says with authority, relishing the syllables as they roll from his mouth. □

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE CENTREX

MARK HALLIDAY

The centrex was gone, and nothing would ever be the same.

The permanence of this crisis was not immediately recognized.

Mattie told Hattie, and she leapt out of her cowboy-hat pajamas into more mature clothing. Without breakfasting they went out to search. After a fruitless hour, they stopped at a roadside stall where Mattie had two nectarines. Hattie bought an apple but couldn't eat it: she was too worried. The day was hot and dusty with no blue in the sky—the worst kind of summer day—and the temperature was expected to rise till well into the afternoon. Oh brother, thought Mattie, turning off the car radio, this is going to be a long one. He wished he had a damp towel. But he wasn't going to be a baby about all this.

Hattie caught herself thinking: Why couldn't he keep better track of the damn centrex? But immediately she saw the folly of this attitude. Awareness of the centrex had never been any more Mattie's responsibility than her own, and of course there was no sound reason why it should be; hadn't the feminist movement made that abundantly clear? Minor differences of personal style aside, she and Mattie were equally adults, independent agents, unique individual responsible persons trying their best to cut a path through the thickets of Seventies culture; and they had agreed to share the tribulations as well as the exhilarations of this struggle. But neither of them had reckoned on the disappearance of the centrex. Hattie remembered a magazine article which contended that unless certain trends could be reversed, the centrex might disappear as early as 1995. She had shown the article to her old friend from college, Reine Wing. Reine Wing always had a great way of taking things in stride without seeming foolhardy. Reine Wing scanned the article and flipped the magazine dexterously into the trash bag beside the stove. "No sweat," she said gaily. "The guy is one of those doomsday journalists, you find them in all fields, he makes a buck by acting grimmer and graver than anybody else. Pessimism is a job for those guys."

"What about those statistics?" Hattie asked, her brow still gathered in alarm. "And the argument—it's eloquent!"

"People who don't want to face the present focus

hyperbolically on the far future," Reine Wing said. "By 1995 you'll be well into middle age. You'll be all set." And off she went to the Institute where she taught dance.

Hattie wondered where Reine Wing was now. They had been out of touch for the last six months. It was such a pain to stay in touch with everybody, much as you might like them. Reine Wing had said something about going to Miami for the summer to live by selling Polaroid snapshots. "They eat 'em up," she said.

Hattie wondered if Reine Wing had noticed the absence of the centrex. If it was gone here, it must be gone there, mustn't it? This seemed a crazy question and Hattie supposed Mattie would mock her for asking, but this was no day for cautious vanity, so she asked him.

He was not nearly as positive as she expected. "It must be," he said. "I mean, how could it be gone here and still be hanging around in Miami, for Christ's sake? If it was going to hang around anywhere it would probably be Colorado," Mattie hazarded. He liked mountain-climbing. He wiped a little nectarine juice from his lips with the back of a tanned hand. He turned the radio on again and tuned in the news. But the announcer seemed to know nothing about the centrex or where it might have headed. On the other hand, everything he reported seemed informed by a deep recognition that the centrex was at least temporarily gone.

"He's no fool," Mattie said. "He knows, but he's not allowed to talk about it on the air. Or maybe he's scared of starting a panic."

Hattie thought Mattie was indulging his taste for sensationalism. "What do you mean a panic? We're not running amok, are we? You think we're the only people in town who have figured out what's wrong?"

"No," he said, grinning, "we're just the only ones intelligent enough to care."

They could not keep up their light-hearted banter. The sky stayed gray and the humidity increased along with the temperature. They got stuck in a traffic jam on the way home and lost hours of potential searching time. When they were still two miles from home Hattie saw her

MARK HALLIDAY is a graduate student at Brandeis University.

sister Hope on a street corner, clutching packages. Hope hopped in for a ride.

She was sucking a Kool-Pop.

"Blue," said Mattie, "what flavor is blue?"

"I don't know," said Hope, "it's weird."

"But you like it?"

"I don't know," said Hope, nuzzling reflectively. "It's weird."

"I think we have something a little more important to talk about today," said Hattie irritably. "Now, Hope, this is something really serious. Are you listening?"

Hope was opening one of her packages but she stopped and gave Hattie her undivided attention for a minute.

"Hope, we found out this morning—we noticed, I mean we sort of figured out, that something very important is missing."

"Missing from your house?"

"From all over," said Mattie. He gave a blast on the horn to prompt some progress, or at least change, in the tie-up at the rotary. It was a little car but its horn was masterfully loud, and it joined the democratic cacophony.

"What is the centrex, again?" Hope asked.

"How did you know I was talking about the centrex?" Hattie demanded.

"Cuz you always get serious and heavy like this when you're worried about the centrex."

"You're going to feel the same way in a few years, honey," Mattie said. His usual equanimity had taken a pounding today. The seat was soaked with sweat under his thighs.

"Okay, could you just give me a definition?" asked Hope.

"Come on, Hope," Mattie began, "you know better than—"

"Let me handle this, please," Hattie interposed. She summarized for Hope their basic thinking about the nature of the centrex.

"Awright, awright, I get it," said Hope. "It's weird, but I get it."

"Why is it weird?" asked the older sister patiently.

"It's just very Sixties," said Hope.

"Jesus Christ," Mattie sighed. It had been a long day and now evening was upon them. The traffic was flowing almost freely at last, and he drove to the campus where Hope was a freshman. He wished he had kept his temper better because he knew that Hope was actually a very bright kid underneath all the jargon and feigned nonchalance; in fact, it crossed his mind that if Hope really concentrated she might figure out where the centrex would be. But she pretended not to be interested.

"Well, good luck finding it," she said cheerfully as she climbed out of the back seat, leaving her Kool-Pop wrapper on the floor of the car. "You could call a counseling service," she suggested now, to show she was not unsympathetic. "Or, if you want, I could speak to the chaplain here at school—"

"That's not a funny idea," Mattie said.

"She didn't mean it as a joke," said Hattie. "Listen, Hope, I'll call you later, okay? We're going to need to do a lot of thinking about this . . . and some planning. . . ."

Hope drew two record albums from one of her bags to show Hattie. "I got 'Bat Out Of Hell' by Meat Loaf. It's stupid but I get a kick out of it. And 'Bust Your Sweet Face' by Father Passion and the Human Sacrifice. Weird stuff."

Hattie felt a headache developing. "Hope you like them," she said wearily.

"Not the greatest choices, I realize," Hope said. She laughed. "I got some better records yesterday."

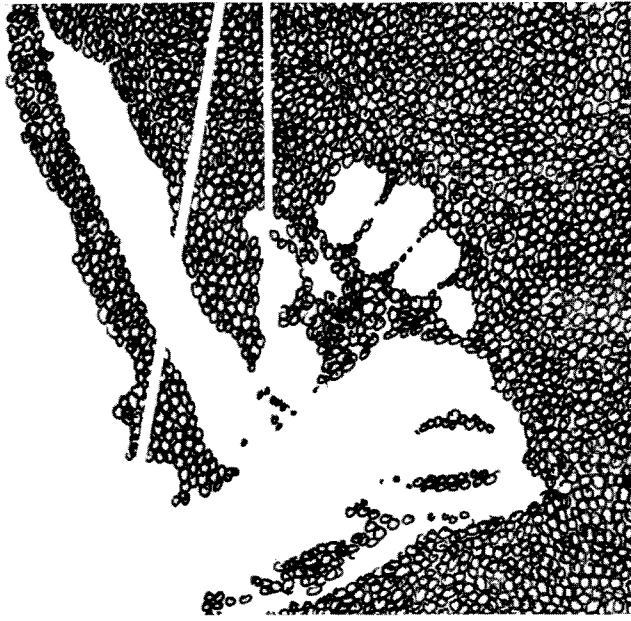
Mattie and Hattie drove home and reheated the lasagna. Over it they had a thorough discussion of the whole problem. There were many ramifications and Hattie made a list. It felt good to have the ramifications isolated from each other on paper. On the other hand, Hattie's headache persisted and the lasagna did nothing for it. Mattie rather bravely suggested that she take some aspirin and go to bed; but she couldn't see leaving him to pace the house alone knowing that the centrex was gone and might (conceivably) never fully return. Hattie brought her box of college texts down from the attic, and they both began to read up on various aspects of the centrex. Every significant passage seemed to open up new areas of relevance, though, and the hours passed swiftly. Mattie kept a wet towel wrapped around his head like a turban as he read. Hattie said he resembled a zealot of a foreign and forgotten faith, and he smiled in an abstracted way—he was speed-reading a book called *The American Pageant*.

It was nearly three o'clock when they staggered into their pajamas. They slept with the bedroom air-conditioner on full blast. Before falling asleep Mattie focused for a minute on all the neat little schooners sailing on the arm of his pajama-top, and wished he were aboard. "Batten down the hatches," he murmured to Hattie. But she was already asleep.

Next morning right after breakfast Hattie drove to the Walnut Hill Home where her mother resided. Maybe her mother would remember something which would provide the necessary clue about where the centrex might hide out. Maybe it had occasionally sneaked away in her time, too; Hattie seemed to recall some rumors to that effect. Or maybe age somehow gave a person a kind of wisdom about these things; maybe her mother would simply say: "Oh, you silly goose, go look in the chapel!" or "Just come with me over to the library and we'll get this straightened out."

But Hattie's mother could not help. She claimed to have noticed that the centrex was missing, in fact she believed it had been mostly gone for "one hell of a lot more than twenty-four hours." But she did not seem especially concerned, and anyway there was no practical means for her to assist in the search since her weak health confined her to Walnut Hill. Her chief concern today was the idiocy of her neighbors on the third floor of the Home. "You can't believe the nonsense they talk all day," the old woman complained. "It's nothing but blather blather blather from morning till night."

Hattie promised to bring some fresh fruit on her next visit, and went home to join Mattie in the continuation of the search. It was another scorcher. All around them people seemed to carry on fairly normally, almost as if the centrex were still in its proper place. □



K. Dyble Thompson

Meet Me In Bubble Land

Monica Yates

Eugene wants people to believe he is fine, and that maybe it is a mistake for him to be in a nursing home at all. For this reason, he takes great pride in the polite conversation he makes with the nurses, and with his friend Virginia. Virginia has had a stroke, and she also has some kind of degenerative disease. Eugene can't remember the name of the disease, but he knows it is the reason that Virginia is a patient. She has to sit in a wheelchair and have help with her food. Eugene supposes that she must need help getting ready for bed at night as well, but they don't discuss this. Eugene likes to show Virginia his photography books, and pictures he has taken. His pictures are of butterflies, flowers, and his grandson, whose name is Sam.

Eugene is sitting in front of the television in the day room. He is waiting for a pill which the nurse always brings at eleven-thirty. A celebrity talk show is on the television. He has been in the nursing home for fourteen months, ever since a series of dizzy spells and falls, and pots left to burn on the stove, made his family decide that he ought to move out of his apartment.

He is sitting very straight—a thin man, he has always had good posture. He has his hands resting on top of his cane, which he has leaned against his chair, near his weak leg, in case he needs it. Nervously, he rearranges his hands. He puts the bottom hand on top of the top hand, the top hand on top of the bottom hand. When he was eleven, Eugene was on a baseball team, and he remembers watching the captains, of his team and the other team, piling their hands on top of the bat this way, to see which team would bat first. He looks at his right hand, which is on top, and thinks that it would be first at bat. "First at bat, first at bat," he says out loud, and smiles.

"Well, Eugene, it's good to see you smiling for a

change." The nurse enters the room, pushing a cart with a tray of medicines on it. She startles Eugene—for a minute, he had forgotten about his pill, and now he feels foolish. He doesn't like to have the nurse talking so loud about how he usually doesn't smile. He looks around at the other patients to see if they've heard.

The nurse, whose name is Betty, hands Eugene his pill, in a little cup, and cup of water to take it with. She is very young, and she has only been working at the nursing home for a short time. Even so, Eugene can't remember the name of the nurse who worked before she came. He wishes he could, because then he could ask after her, and have a conversation with Betty.

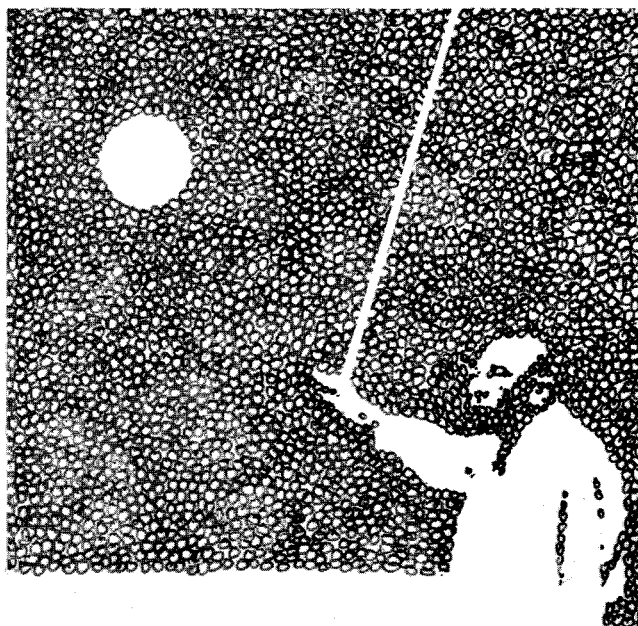
Without waiting for him to finish drinking his water, Betty frowns and looks down at her tray of medicines. She picks out a tiny cup of applesauce and crumbles a blue pill into it. She starts to carry it across the room to a man who is drooling, but Eugene stops her.

"You forgot. Here is my cup—I can't just keep holding it, you know." He laughs a little, and hopes that the nurse will laugh too, but she doesn't. She takes the empty cup and throws it into a plastic lined trash can as she walks over to feed the drooling man his applesauce, which is blue from the pill. She looks around the room, then again at her medicine tray, and takes, efficiently, two little cups, with two pills in them. She hands these to two women who are sitting along the wall. They both put their pills in their mouths, and each accepts the cup of water that Betty hands her. One of the women smiles shyly at Betty and takes hold of her arm as she gives her back the cup.

MONICA YATES lives in Massachusetts. This is her first appearance in the NAR.

"Thank you, darling, you're such a dear, sweet nurse, and so good, and kind, to everyone of us here," she says. Her knees are spread apart and Eugene can see that she isn't wearing any underwear. Betty smiles and thanks the woman, patting her hand, and leaves the room. Eugene notices that the other woman is picking her nose, and he sighs. He wonders where Virginia is.

The day room is oddly decorated, Eugene thinks. "We want the home to be a lovely, cheery place," he has heard the supervisor of nurses say, when she was giving a tour, "so we try to stay away from the traditionally drab, institutional colors." Eugene looks around, and tries to feel cheered by the room. It is certainly not drab; the



wallpaper is striped and colorful, and the pattern is different on one of the walls. There are only three walls: where the fourth should be, the room is open. It faces a U-shaped desk which serves as a nurse's station. The linoleum floor gleams, and Eugene feels dizzy. He closes his eyes.

"OH YES, MIKE, VEGAS HAS BEEN INCREDIBLE!" the television shouts suddenly. Eugene opens his eyes and sees that a little short man with a cigar in his mouth is fiddling with the volume control.

"You get away from there! Nurse! Nurse!" cries the woman who has been picking her nose.

"God-damned machine, lousy damned thing, runs all the time . . ." mutters the man with the cigar, whose name is Pete. He changes the channel to one without a picture, so that the television hisses loudly. Several people come to the doors of their rooms.

"Pete! Pete! You come away from there, right this minute!" Eugene hears Virginia's strong voice, and feels relieved. "Betty! Pete is interfering with the television again!" Virginia calls. She is wheeling herself down the hall, with her hands on the wheels of her chair. Her hands are twisted and she can hardly move them, but she manages to hold on to the wheels and push herself. One arm is weaker than the other, and she must push twice with it for

each time she pushes with the stronger arm. She makes awkward progress, and she is out of breath. "Betty!" she calls again. "Betty! Please come and *do* something about this!"

Betty comes back into the day room, dragging her cart; it rattles and bangs. She calls for the nurses' aides. "Rosa! Rosa! Elsie! Come help me with Pete!" Rosa and Elsie have been in the linen room, and they come out with their arms full of towels. Betty tells them to put down the towels, for heaven's sake.

Pete has turned off the television and is kicking the screen, clenching his fists. Eugene is alarmed until he realizes that Pete's legs are too weak to allow him to kick very hard.

Betty and Rosa approach Pete. "Fuck," Pete is saying. He kicks the screen, and his slipper makes a soft sound. "Fuck this shit. Fuck this." He tightens his fist, draws his foot away from the set, and swings: another feeble kick.

"Come on, now, Pete, leave the television alone," says Betty, taking his arm. Pete jerks his arm away.

"Hey, Pete, Peter, Petey! What's the matter now? How about coming over here, to sit down with me?" Rosa says. She is seventeen, a Puerto Rican with large breasts, and she wears a lot of makeup. She puts her arm around Pete, and brings him over to an upholstered chair. The chair has a table which can be locked in place, so that the person who sits in it can't get out. There are four of these lined up along one wall. "Pete! You still my boyfriend?" she asks, pinching his cheek as she helps him into the chair and snaps the tray table into place.

"Ah, shut up," says Pete, making a face. "Go fuck yourself."

Betty tells Pete to stay in the chair until lunch. "Fifteen minutes, Pete, that's all." She leaves the room, dragging her cart of medicines, for the second time. "Coming Lucy," she says, to an overweight woman who has been standing in the door of her room, halfway down the hall.

"I should *hope* so," the woman says. "It's almost ten of twelve, and my shoulders do ache so."

Eugene realizes, suddenly, that he has been holding his breath for some time, and he exhales. "Hello, Eugene," calls Virginia. She is sitting near the nurse's station. Virginia! Eugene gets up, with the help of his cane. He walks over to her, and bends down to peer at her face.

"You're late, this morning. Are you feeling well?" he asks.

"Me? Oh, I'm fine, Eugene. What nonsense, to worry about me." She smiles. "I was at the hairdresser's." Eugene looks at her hair, and notices that it has been cut and set, and changed somehow. It looks bluish, and reminds him of the spun sugar that he used to eat at fairs. He doesn't like it, but he smiles and tells her that he does. He tells her that he has a new picture of Sam, and asks if she would like to see it.

"I want to go to bed!" Pete shouts, rattling the tray that holds him in his chair. Virginia frowns and suggests that they move to a window at the end of the hall, where it's quieter. The idea pleases them both, until Eugene

remembers that it is almost time for lunch, and that Rosa will expect them to be waiting by the elevator, with the other patients who go downstairs to the dining room. Oh well, they tell each other. Perhaps another time. Elsie, thin and wearing a loose fitting white uniform, arrives to push Virginia to the elevator. She seems too young to be working as a nurse's aide, and Eugene is surprised each time she tells him that she has two children.

At the elevator, everyone is confused. Rosa has disappeared. "A phone call. I think she said she had to answer the phone," says Billy, who is a dwarf. He doesn't seem to mind the tendency of some of the women to mother him.

"What if the door opens before she comes back? What will we do?" a tiny woman wonders. She has several handkerchiefs. She is using one to wipe her brow, and she has others tucked in her sleeve, in the pocket of her blouse, in her collar. "I just started walking eight days ago. I get dizzy. I'll fall. I know I'll fall—oh! If my *daughter* knew . . .," she says importantly.

Virginia moves a little closer to Eugene and asks, calmly, if he knows what they are having for lunch.

"Liver, I think," says Eugene. When he was a boy, he fed his liver to his dog, and later, when he was married, his wife cooked liver when she was angry with him, because she knew he hated it. He always feels guilty when he eats liver. Virginia doesn't care for it either. In fact, not many of the patients do. At the nurse's station, Betty is on the phone, asking the kitchen to send sandwiches for the patients who eat in their rooms. She already knows they will refuse the liver.

Rosa comes hurrying down the hall, and presses the elevator button. "Come on, come on. Let's all squash in now, plenty of room," she says, in her loud, cheerful, Spanish-accented voice. Eugene likes Rosa—she smiles and sings, sometimes she even dances as she works—and ever since Eugene told her that he knows a few words in Spanish, she speaks simple Spanish words to him when she thinks of it.

Everyone crowds into the elevator. Billy is crushed against Eugene's thigh. He has a cold, and Eugene winces as Billy sneezes and snuffles loudly.

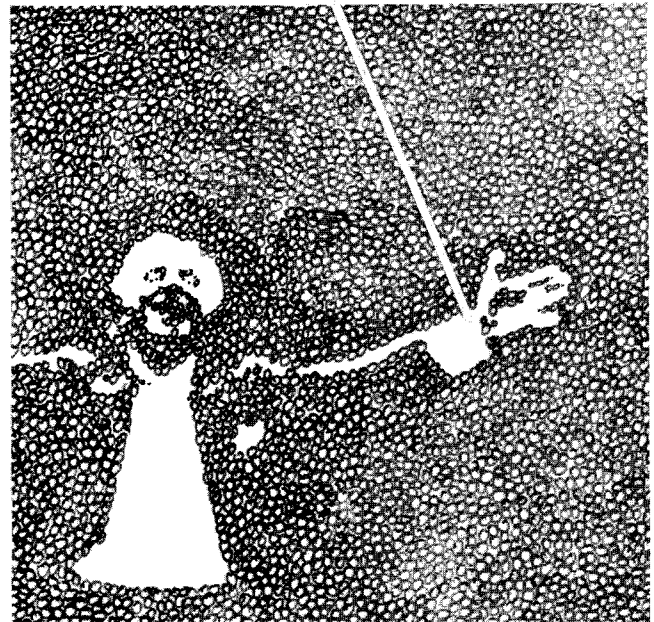
In the dining room there are five tables, and ten people sit at each table. There are two other floors in the nursing home, and the patients from these floors are already sitting at their places. Eugene walks over to his table. He is proud of it, because almost everyone who sits there is well-mannered and clean. When he first came, he was seated at another table by mistake, and a toothless woman grabbed at his food with her hand. A man fell asleep with his head in his plate.

Now his table is pleasant. Virginia is there, along with Rosa, who helps her to eat, and Billy, who is polite, and a woman from downstairs named Emily, who looks very sweet. She eats her food nicely, Eugene thinks, although once when he asked her for the salt she cried, "How *dare* you? I am a *lady*!" and became so upset that the aide from her floor had to take her upstairs. He doesn't try to talk to her anymore. Also seated at the table is Joe, a man who sings constantly, but so softly that it usually doesn't interfere with his eating, and a woman who is fine until the end of the meal, when she always spills her coffee unless Rosa

is quick enough to remind her to drink it instead. Because Rosa sits with them, helping Virginia, there are only two other patients at the table, a Jewish couple who seem to be very contented. They invited Eugene to play Mah-Jongg with them once, but he was confused by the rules and it was embarrassing for them all.

The liver arrives, and everyone begins to eat. "Your hair looks very nice, Virginia," says the Jewish lady. Virginia smiles and says thank you, and lowers her head so that Rosa can spoon some liver into her mouth.

"May all your troubles, fade like bubbles, meet me in *Bub-ble Land*!" sings Joe. Eugene remembers the song and he unconsciously hums it to himself as he picks at his



food. *So far away, from Trouble Land!* He knows he should eat more. "Look at you! You're fading away," fusses his daughter, Sam's mother, whenever she visits. She is heavy, and when she comes she brings him an assortment of butter cookies in a tin. He likes the cookies, and he wishes, as he pokes at his liver, that he had some now.

When they get back upstairs, it is time to go to their rooms for naps. Eugene says goodbye to Virginia, promising to bring the picture of Sam to her room later. As he walks to his room, he recognizes the voice of the nursing supervisor. It makes him nervous, and he backs away a little from the sound. The supervisor is standing in the doorway of the room next door to Eugene's, and she seems very angry.

"Now *look*. You girls are not going to be allowed to get away with this kind of thing *any longer*," she says. There is a small pile of trash on the floor outside the room, which belongs to the man who was drooling in the day room, whose name is Elmo. There are several dirty washcloths, a half-empty box of chocolates, some old magazines, and a toothless comb in the pile. Betty comes out of the room, looking pale, with an armload of dirty clothes, which she puts into a linen cart that Elsie has been hastily sent to get.

Elsie bends down and starts to pick up some of the litter from the floor. Rosa comes up, just then, and asks what is wrong. "Go and get some disinfectant, *now!*" Betty whispers angrily. She goes back into Elmo's room, from which the supervisor can still be heard. "Unspeakable! Unsanitary! This is a health care facility, and you are *supposed* to be a professional staff!"

What is going on? Eugene is afraid, but curious. He hesitates for a moment, then walks stiffly past the open door of the room, looking inside as he goes by. The women in the room don't notice him. The nursing supervisor is bent over one of the dresser drawers, emptying it out into a plastic bag which Betty is holding. Elmo is sitting in his wheelchair, in the corner. He is muttering, "Wait a minute, now, hold on there, I *need* that." His speech is barely audible, and no one listens to him. He reaches out with one hand and tries to take hold of Betty's skirt. Eugene blinks, and for a minute he is afraid that he has made a mistake, that this is *his* room—the furniture is the same—but no, he realizes immediately. There are no flowers in the window of this room, his room has flowers in the window. He hurries to his room now, and is relieved to see that everything is as he left it.

Away from the supervisor's voice, Eugene looks affectionately at the things in his room. The flowers in the window, a present from his wife's sister, are just beginning to wilt. He has propped a framed picture of his daughter and Sam against the vase. He opens his nightstand, and looks to see if perhaps there is a cookie in there that he has forgotten. He is a little hungry. Ah, there *is* a cookie, and a package of crackers from yesterday's lunch. He eats the cookie and looks through the rest of the things in the nightstand. He passes over a paperback, an old copy of *Photography* magazine, some letters, a Hershey's chocolate kiss that Sam brought him, and takes out a bundle of snapshots that his daughter has mailed to him. They are pictures that Eugene took several months ago, when he spent a weekend at his daughter's house. He is dissatisfied with them. They are of Sam, and he likes that, but his daughter has had them developed at a discount place and the prints are poor. When he lived in his own house, Eugene developed his own pictures. He sighs and puts the pictures back into the nightstand, keeping out the best one, which he will show to Virginia later. He lies down on his bed and falls asleep.

Virginia's voice wakes him. "I never have heard anything so outrageous! Of course, they mustn't be allowed to get away with it. This is really too much," she is saying, just outside his door. "Eugene!" She knocks. "Eugene! Are you still asleep? May I come in?" Eugene gets up and goes to meet her at the door. Billy is with her, and a tall woman, who is crying.

"Eugene, you just will not believe what has happened." Elsie walks by, dragging a mop, and Virginia pauses. When Elsie is gone, she continues, "Evelyn, here, do you know Evelyn, Eugene?" She nods in the direction of the tearful tall woman. "Anyway, Evelyn tells me that Betty and Rosa have been *going through her drawers*, pawing through her things, throwing things *away*."

"*Stealing* my things," Evelyn sobs. "Stealing and hiding my valuables!"

"Well, yes" says Virginia, doubtfully. "Maybe not stealing, dear, but cleaning. At any rate, touching and *arranging* her personal things!" She stops, and looks to see if Eugene is properly alarmed. Billy says, "Yes, and what's more they want to go into all of our drawers! There's some kind of State inspection next week, and the supervisor came around today and found all kinds of violations of the code." He pushes his chin forward importantly as his little dwarf's voice squeaks "violations of the code."

"Oh! I wish I'd known! I would have given that supervisor a piece of my mind!" Virginia is quite upset, and Eugene thinks, a little guiltily, of his nap. Perhaps he should have said something earlier, when he'd seen the supervisor in Elmo's room. Something else occurs to him, and he asks,

"*Everyone's* room? They're going to go through *all* of our things?" He remembers Elmo, clutching at Betty's skirt and muttering helplessly, and he is afraid. "But they can't!" he cries.

"No, Eugene, they can't if we don't let them." Virginia says. She begins to wheel herself awkwardly down the hall to the day room, and the others follow; Billy and Evelyn (both sniffing) and Eugene, leaning on his cane and worrying.

It is three o'clock, and time for their medicine. When Betty comes into the day room, no one greets her, and everyone looks at her suspiciously. She seems nervous, and twice she drops a pill, and has to go and get another one. Before leaving the room, she faces them all and says, "I guess you've all heard there is going to be an inspection later this week, and well, we all want to make a good impression, right?" She looks hopefully around the room. No one answers, and she continues, "So we're going to be doing an especially thorough cleaning tomorrow." She turns to leave, but before she goes, Virginia says haughtily,

"We don't care *what* you say, Betty. We won't have you going through our personal things." The others in the room nod, glancing at each other nervously. Even the woman without any underwear nods. Betty looks at them all, and then at her watch—she sighs. Soon the evening nurse will be coming on duty. She says, "Well. We'll see," and turns, pushing her cart down the hall, and calling, "Elsie! Don't just sit there! Make up Mr. Simpson's bed!" as she passes the nurse's station. Elsie jumps up and rushes into a nearby room, grabbing linen off a stand in the corner.

The next morning, Eugene comes out of the bathroom, where he has been washing and shaving, to find Virginia waiting by his bed.

"Good morning, Eugene," she says. He is pleased; now he can show her the new picture of Sam. "Eugene, today is the day. Betty said they were going to start cleaning out our drawers *today*." He must have looked blank, because she says, "You haven't forgotten? Eugene! We must stick together. You must realize how important that is. If we all refuse, what can they do?"

Eugene has indeed forgotten, but now he remembers. He looks fondly at the top drawer of his dresser, which is open, and thinks again of Elmo, muttering to himself. Virginia is right. They have to stick together. He looks at

her face, which is set determinedly, and feels hopeful. Together, they go to the elevator to wait to be taken down for breakfast.

At breakfast, when Rosa gets up to get some more milk from the kitchen, Billy tells them he overheard Betty telling Rosa and Elsie that the patients who eat upstairs are going to have their drawers and closets cleaned first. Everyone listens, and he goes on, eagerly, "because they're too sick, you know, to notice much."

"How *horrible*," says the Jewish lady.

"Yes, how terrible," says her husband. They are from a different floor, and they begin to talk about how their drawers and closets have been "given a thorough going over" the day before. Virginia looks alarmed, and the wife says, "But, I mean, it was different with us, we *let* them."

"You mean you *wanted* them to go through your things?" asks Virginia.

"Well, not really, not at first, but our nurse explained it all to us, you see, and we felt, well, we could see her point," the woman says, and she and her husband look at each other and nod. Reassured, they continue to eat. The others look doubtfully at Virginia, who says,

"Maybe they're more decent about it, on your floor, but really, for us, what it comes down to is the *principle* of the thing." She looks at Eugene.

"Yes, the principle," says Eugene, although he isn't sure that he knows what she means. Rosa comes back from the kitchen just then, and they talk about other things.

Upstairs, the cleaning out has begun. Betty is going into a room near the elevator, with Elsie behind her, carrying a trash bag which is already half full. It is a clear plastic bag, and Eugene can see several packages of patent medicines—laxatives, chewable vitamins, mouth-wash—along with cookies, shoe polish, newspapers and tissues. "Hello!" Betty is saying brightly, as she enters the room. "We're going to do a little straightening *up* today!" Eugene steps closer to the door, but he doesn't hear any protest from the man in the room. He has the radio on, though, and he has a tube connected to a plastic bag hanging from his wheelchair. The bag is filled with urine. Eugene watches as Betty opens one drawer, then the next, throwing things into Elsie's bag that he is too far away to recognize. He shudders, and goes to find Virginia.

She is in her room and her radio is on, too. When Eugene comes in she brightens. "Hello! Come and see what I've got," she says, and tells him to open her drawer. He does, and takes out the little parcel she points to. Before closing the drawer, he can't help noticing the kinds of things she keeps there—so different from his! There is a comb and brush set, with sea shells glued to the back of the brush, several jars and boxes with perfume and powder in them, a bookmark that Eugene gave her at Christmas, and some embroidered handkerchiefs. He is surprised to find her drawer so feminine, but he thinks of a picture she showed him once, of herself when she was younger. She was slim, and softer than she seems now. There was something very appealing about her eyes, Eugene remembers. The things in the drawer go well

with the woman in the picture, Eugene thinks, as he closes the drawer.

"Eugene, do hurry. Bring it here, and open it." Eugene sits down on a chair facing Virginia, and opens the parcel. Inside, there are three ten-inch gingerbread men, with icing and raisins. "My niece sent me these," she says proudly, as they bite into the cookies. Virginia has no children. She does have several nieces and nephews, but none of them live close enough to visit much. Eugene asks after the niece, and they talk a little. Eugene has just replaced the third cookie in Virginia's drawer, when Betty comes in. She is carrying a clipboard.

"Well, Virginia, are you going to let us tidy up your drawers today?" she asks. Virginia frowns.

"No! I thought I made myself clear. I won't have you



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going through my personal things." With her stronger arm, she gives a sharp tug to the wheel of her chair, turning herself from Betty. Betty looks at her clipboard. She still seems nervous, Eugene thinks. She looks at Virginia's profile and says, "But Rosa helped you get ready this morning, isn't that true? She must have had to go into that drawer several times. It doesn't make any sense to object to a little straightening up now, does it?" She looks inquiringly at Eugene, who looks uneasily at Virginia. Virginia's face tightens, and she says:

"This is different. Rosa touches my things with my *permission*. I will not have people sorting, cleaning, and discarding. I refuse to have my drawers rearranged to suit your rules and regulations. This is my *home*."

Betty sighs, and says, "All right, Virginia. We'll have to discuss this again later." She leaves the room, and just before she moves off down the hall, she says, "Eugene, I hope *you* won't be unreasonable about this." Without thinking, Eugene swells a little with pride over the trust implied in that "*you*." He is startled when Virginia sighs, and he shakes his head; he feels guilty, as if he has already abandoned her. He hasn't, he reminds himself, and feels better. He can still taste the gingerbread in his mouth. He thanks Virginia again for the cookie, and gets up to leave.

He wants to be in the day room when Betty comes with the medicines.

"Eugene, you won't let them do it, will you?" Virginia stops him, her hand on his arm. Eugene looks at her twisted, helpless fingers, and then at her eyes. He is alarmed; he has never seen her pleading like this, and it embarrasses him. He feels suddenly tired and confused. He presses her hand as reassuringly as he can, and tells her "not to worry, not to worry. Things will work out." He avoids her eyes as he takes his cane and goes out the door. He is afraid that he has disappointed her somehow, and he doesn't want to know for certain that he has.

At lunch, Billy confesses that he has allowed Elsie to clean out his drawer. "I mean," he says, looking around at the others with a little smile that is at once apologetic and challenging. "I mean, I thought about it, and I figured, they work so hard—the nurses and the aides, I mean—they do so much for us, to help us, that well, it just seems like we should try to make it easier for them, if we can, that's all." Eugene looks uncomfortably at Virginia. Maybe it would be better to be reasonable like Billy.

Virginia says, "It's the only decent thing to do, is that it? The Christian thing, right, Billy? Really, Billy, it's too much. Is this a charitable institution for the good of the nurses? Maybe we should encourage Betty to stay off her feet more!" She makes a disgusted sound, and looks coldly off into the distance.

Eugene looks at her proudly. She is so intelligent, so strong, and she is counting on him! He decides he won't let them clean his drawer, if only for her sake. He forgets that he ever wavered. Rosa comes back to the table from a conversation with the cook, and the topic changes.

When Eugene gets back to his room, he finds that his daughter, her husband, and Sam are there. They have come for a visit, and Eugene feels at once how long it has been since the last one—a month! Sam is sitting on the bed, playing with a container of aftershave lotion that is shaped like a car. Eugene feels a sudden fondness for the aftershave, which was a present from an old friend of his wife's. It has always seemed dull to him before. His daughter is rearranging the flowers on the windowsill, discarding the ones that have wilted, changing the water. He hadn't realized until now, how the flowers were beginning to depress him. His son-in-law, Phil, sits in the padded vinyl easy chair which is in all the rooms, for visitors. He is the first to notice Eugene, who has been standing quietly in the doorway, too pleased, at first, with the picture of his family, to want to say anything.

"Hullo, Dad! What's the news?" Phil is a salesman. Overweight, like his wife, he looks clean and satisfied. He always asks Eugene, "What's the news?" Eugene laughs and shakes Phil's hand, as Sam slides off the bed and runs to him for a hug. "Gramps!" he cries, and buries his head in Eugene's thigh. He is a sticky little boy, and he smells of sweat and the lollipop he's been eating. Eugene rubs his hand through Sam's hair, and kisses his daughter.

"Hello, Maureen," he says. Maureen smiles and kisses him back. She hands him a tin of the butter cookies, and Eugene feels so happy that he is dizzy, and has to sit down.

Maureen finishes with the flowers, sits down across from Eugene, takes out her knitting, and tells him about the garden, the car repairs, Sam's report card, the leaky pipe in the basement, Phil's ham radio set. "Dad, you wouldn't believe it. We talked to a man from Seoul, Korea, last night! It came in so clear—what'd he call himself, Phil?"

"Leo the Lion. The damndest thing, Dad, you can really learn to know a guy, by the 'handle' he uses, you know? Leo the Lion. I wish I'd thought of that one," says Phil, shaking his head slowly.

"Brrooomm. Brrrrrooom. Eeeee!" Sam is revving up the aftershave bottle, and bringing it to screeching halts just short of Eugene's pillow. Eugene looks at them all—his family—and beams.

They have been visiting for about an hour, when Betty comes in, carrying her clipboard. She smiles a little distractedly as Eugene introduces her to his daughter, his son-in-law, and his grandson, and she says, "Yes, we've met. How do you do?" His daughter seems to like Betty, Eugene notices. He is proud.

"Eugene, are you ready to have your drawer cleaned now?" asks Betty.

Eugene swallows. He has forgotten. As always, the hour spent with his family—the news they bring him, the things they worry about—has driven whole weeks of the nursing home from his mind.

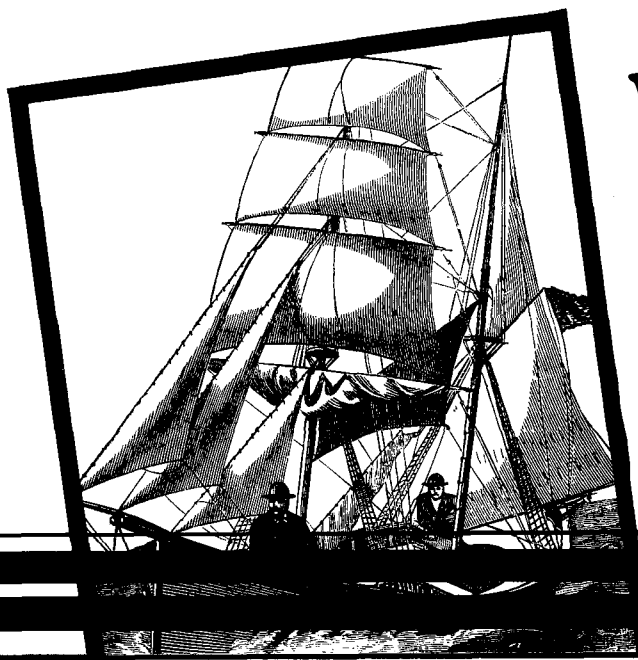
With an effort, he thinks of Virginia, of their conversation this morning, of the scene at lunch. He looks at Betty, then at the floor, and says, slowly, "No. I don't think I want you to do that."

Betty sighs. "Oh dear, Eugene, I really didn't expect to have a problem with *you*."

Again that confidential emphasis on "*you*." Eugene looks at her—she is very young, he reminds himself. He thinks of the nursing supervisor, and feels sorry for Betty. Still . . . He remembers Virginia's drawer, and he thinks about the gingerbread man; she has been such a good friend. He stares at his hands, and frowns, and moves his feet uneasily from side to side.

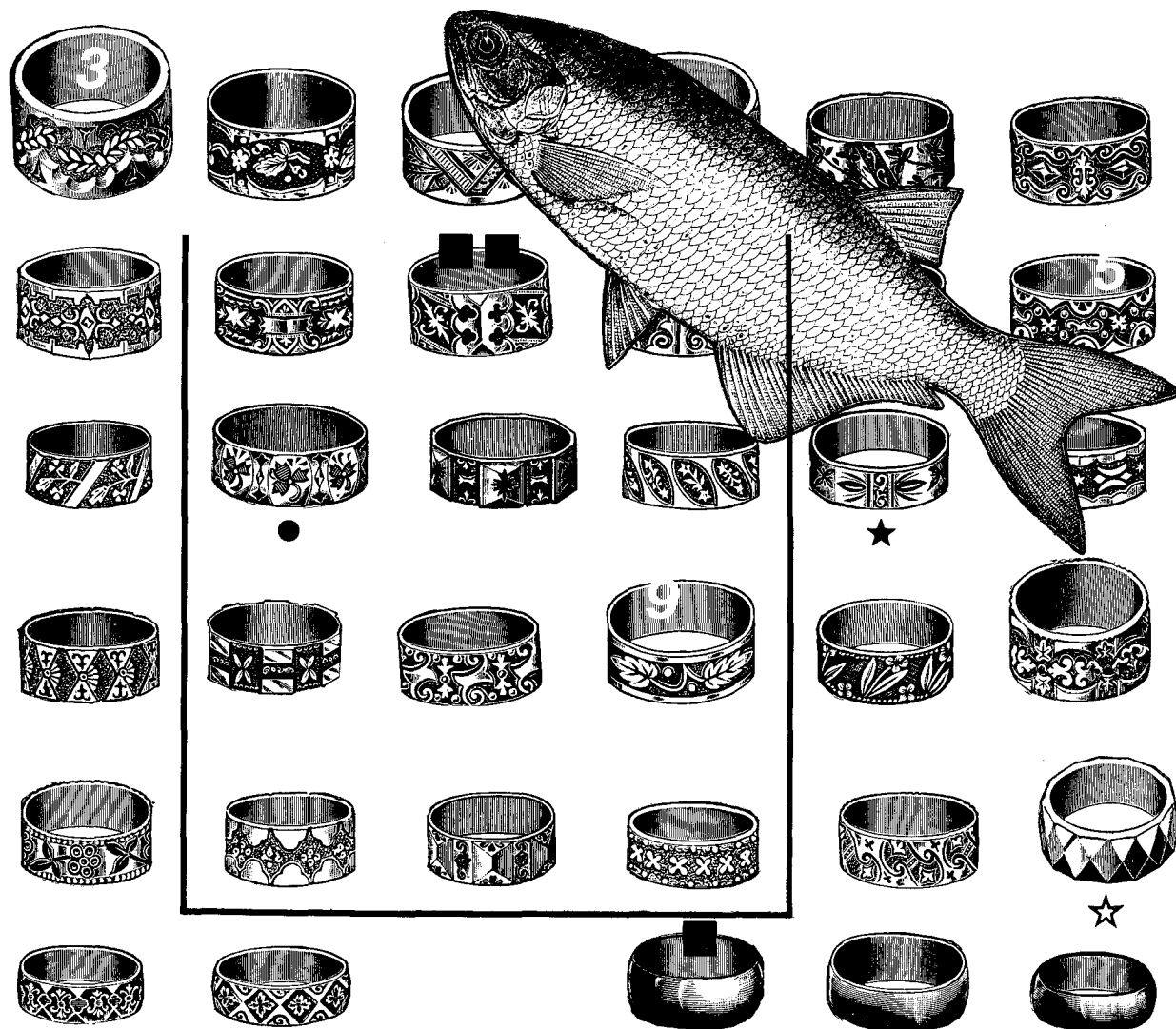
He hears his daughter cough. For a minute, he has forgotten she was there. He looks at her, and is startled to see her looking apologetically at Betty. Have these two been discussing him, then? He looks at his son-in-law, who is carefully, it seems to Eugene, avoiding his glance. Only Sam seems not to realize what is happening, and suddenly Eugene is afraid that he will find out. All at once Eugene sees himself clearly, as his family and Betty must surely see him—a feeble, tiresome old man, who is being unreasonable and difficult, as such people often are. He can't stand it. Of course it is much more sensible, more adult, to do as he is asked. It is only a little thing, after all. What right has he to disturb the busy flow of their lives with what amounts to a whim of his own? Closing his eyes, with a silent apology to Virginia, he says, yes, of course, how foolish of him, that he realizes how important these things are.

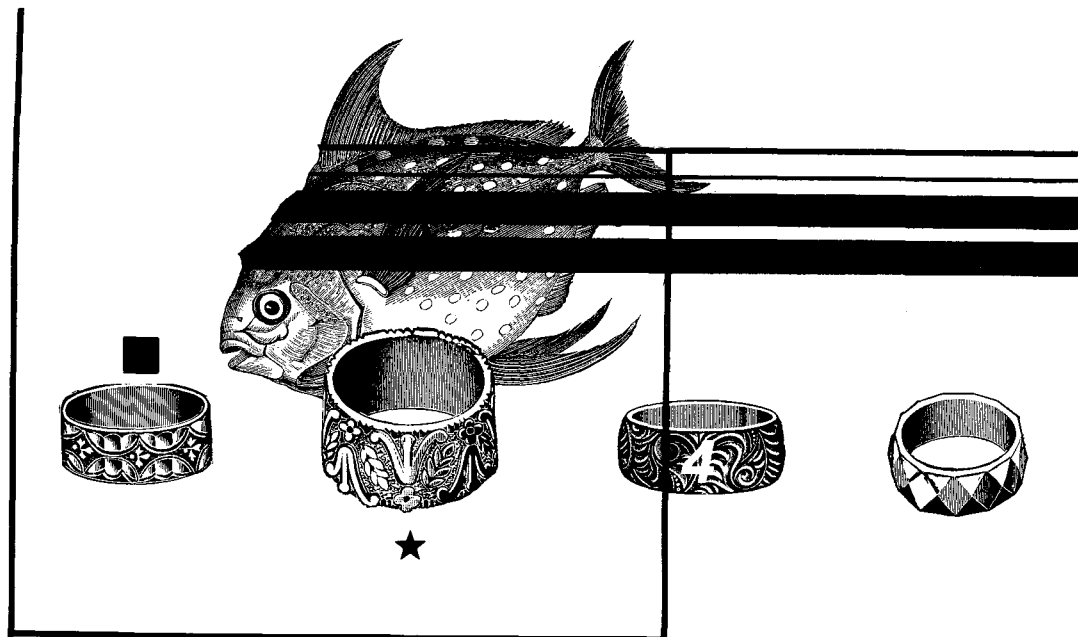
To show how well he understands the situation, how willing he is to do his part, he gets up and crosses the room to open his drawer. □



WANDA'S WEDDING

RICHARD BROOK





Heavy stone walls marked the limits of high tide around the harbor at Cascais, and also protected a stretch of sand beach for landing boats. If geography or politics had worked out differently and Portugal owned more than its four or five deep water ports, the style of docking boats and the ways men fished might have been different. But the long coast of Portugal offered only sheer rock cliffs or long sandy strands, so the men who worked the sea built small boats that comfortably nuzzled up to a soft shallow bar of sand. If they did not fish from these boats, they used them as tenders to reach the larger craft moored where the water lay deeper.

The sand beach at Cascais filled up with sunbathers and tourists during the day. In the afternoon fishing boats straggled into the harbor and sent rocker-shaped tenders ashore. Often two men rowed in and off-loaded the catch that was already dressed out in square flat boxes. Each tray was heavy enough to require a separate hike up the beach and across the plaza to the city fish market, but the two men usually worked together, bearing between them the weight of two or more boxes slung with rope handles. Colored boats and tenders waited at the water's edge, always with a long line heading up onto the beach and ending in a grappling anchor hooked into the earth, as if the boat had cast out and caught the land. If the tide were high at noon, by the end of the day the sand was crowded with beached fishing boats, most of them heeled slightly, each recording by its position an earlier shoreline that retreated with the tide.

Past this walled beach ran the Marginal, a roadway that skirted the water all the way from Lisbon and passed along the Sun Coast of Portugal, thirty-five or forty kilometers, narrowing at last to two lanes as it went through Cascais. Ten kilometers beyond town, past Boca do Inferno, at Guincho Beach, the road turned away from the water, went up into the mountains and rocky cliffs beyond, and passed Cabo da Roca, that westernmost bump in the coast of Europe above Lisbon.

RICHARD BROOK is a contributing editor of the NAR. "Wanda's Wedding" is from a novel tentatively titled Arcade Bear.

Across the Marginal, there in Cascais, in a crescent running from west to east, or from left to right as Stephen Kaslow stood with his back to the harbor, were the Yacht Club, the town offices, a hotel, and the city fish market, as well as the port authority buildings. And nestled between the town fire department and a row of small glittery shops was a tiny Chinese restaurant where both Portuguese and English were spoken. Just inside the door a few minutes later, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dim light after the glare of the late afternoon sun, Stephen admired the noises of guests speaking English and Chinese waiters briskly repeating each food order in Portuguese.

Sidney Belvidere, owner and master of the *Phaedra*, had asked Stephen to meet him at the restaurant in order to discuss business over dinner. When Stephen arrived late, at seven-thirty, the captain and crew of the *Phaedra* were licking their fingers over appetizers, slurping wine.

"We've a place for you right here. Sit down. Sit down, man." A rangy bushy-haired giant half stood to direct the ceremony. "This is Wendell, and this is Clea, and that's Wanda there." He put a large hand on his bare chest and smiled with shiny cracked lips. "I'm Sidney, of course."

Stephen beamed and muttered hello softly as each of them was introduced. He was half standing and half sitting, bobbing as each name was called out.

There was a silence as the captain and crew sized up Stephen.

"Well, Mr. Kaslow," said Sidney after a moment. "I understand that you'd like to buy my boat."

The man named Wendell reached diagonally across the table and picked up a small black olive from a saucer in front of Stephen's plate. After working his closed mouth for an instant Wendell removed the pit from between his teeth, held it like a pearl in two fingers, and reached back across the table to deposit the rough tan stone on another saucer beside the first. A sheen of perspiration coated his great tanned chest and shoulders. He was not wearing a shirt and looked as if he never had. Sidney was better dressed but still barechested, his blouse open to his navel. Both men smiled from deep inside bushy brown beards and squinted out from under curly hair that stood tangled on the tops of their heads as in a wind at gale force. They

looked like brothers, but Sidney was clearly in charge. Perhaps the shirt was the emblem of his office, and showed that he was here to do business while Wendell and the women devoted themselves to festivity.

"Have some wine?" said Sidney, and Stephen saw his glass filled before he could answer. Wendell thought Sidney handled that well and snickered. Clea and Wanda sat to Stephen's right, opposite the men, and chatted quietly but with animation, as they had before Stephen's introduction.

"I don't know if I want to buy your boat," Stephen said.

"Yes, you do."

"How do you know I want to buy *your* boat? Why not one of the others I've seen?"

"... Man at the marina said so." Sidney belched loudly on a gulp of wine. A man and a woman at the table behind him stopped talking for a moment.

"He would. He'd like to see me buy your boat so he can have his commission."

"Can't." Sidney reached for the bread and broke a large roll, snowing shards of the crust into and around his plate. He pointed his knife for the benefit of a waiter bringing soup.

"Bring him soup too," said Sidney. His mouth was full of dry bread, crumbs hanging in his beard. Talking to the waiter he kept the dinner knife aimed toward Stephen; he handled it like a fencing foil and his wrist seemed limp.

"You can eat out of our rations, Kaslow. We've ordered up everything on the menu. Twice, it seems—once in English and once in the patois. But it's a celebration, you know."

"Of what?"

"The end of the voyage. Selling the boat to you. And Clea and Wanda 'ere are gettin' 'itched." He dropped his *h's* for that statement only. Then he gave Stephen a long wink, screwed up his face as he sat erect, broke more bread, poured more wine, and went to work on his soup.

"I see," said Stephen, who did not see or understand anything he'd heard so far. He decided to proceed first with what he thought was his misunderstanding.

"Clea and Wendell?"

"No." Sidney swallowed what was in his mouth. "Clea and Wanda there." He had his knife out again and waved it, poked it in the direction of the women. "Show him your ring, Wanda." His big jaw worked at the bread merrily.

Clea and Wanda stopped talking and Wanda peered around Clea's breast. Then she put out her long, slender hand and modeled a generous diamond ring. She kept the hand there, between a tall green bottle and Stephen's nose, as if he might want to kiss it. He was afraid she would not move it until he said something, and he didn't know what to say. Clea solved the problem by lifting the hand to her own lips, giving it a slow kiss, and setting it back in Wanda's lap along with her own hand which stayed stroking Wanda's. The two women went back to whispering, smiling, giggling softly.

"As ship's captain, I'm marrying them tonight. Thought we'd eat first, and then all go back to the boat. Like to join us?"

Stephen shook his head with a puzzled smile. "Thanks, though. I'd planned to stick around Cascais and turn in early." He wished he were the kind who could have said, *Thank you. I'd like to do that.* But he wasn't.

"No problem. Boat's right out here in the harbor."

"You moved it?"

"So the marina fellow *won't* get a commission, you know."

It seemed they were back to business again. "Well, what are you asking?" Stephen said. "It won't make much sense for us to get involved in a long talk if your price is higher than I can pay."

"Ten thousand dollars." Sidney closed one eye and looked steadily across the top of his raised wine glass. The wine glass stayed motionless at his lips. He did not sip, slurp, or swallow. His open eye continued to stare out from under that shaggy head of brown hair.

"Out of my league." By twice, Stephen thought. At this point he knew he should leave—or move restlessly to suggest he intended to. Negotiating required this ruse. But he was curious, and hungry, and didn't move at all.

"Rather important league, I'd say. Most likely pretty well-to-do."

"No, that's not so. What makes you think it is?"

"The *Times*."

Sidney nudged Wendell who picked up a rolled newspaper that had turned dark with handling. Stephen accepted the newspaper just above the plate of olive pits.

In that moment, Stephen took in both men. They were big: six-foot-three or -four, or taller. They were wooly. Their long brown arms commanded the combined area of the three square cafe tables hidden under the linen as if it all were no bigger than a lap-sized chessboard. Stephen nodded a thank-you and rolled open the paper to read a small article at the bottom of the outside page. It had been circled with what looked like the heavy lead of a carpenter's pencil.

SOLO ATLANTIC VOYAGE

Lisbon (Reuters). An American yachtsman who in 1961 placed second in the *Times* Trans-Atlantic Singlehanded Race plans another solo crossing of the Atlantic, but this time at a more leisurely pace from Lisbon to Boston.

Stephen Kaslow spoke from Estoril just outside Lisbon yesterday and described his plans to make his western passage in a vintage wooden boat. He explained that the United States finds a growing respect for earlier European methods and materials used in sailboat construction.

Currently employed as European Editor for *Review* magazine, Mr. Kaslow, who has previously written about his solo experiences at sea, hopes to raise interest not only in the restoration of wooden boats, but in the development of improved construction techniques for the use of wood in sailing vessels.

"I'm still looking for the right boat for the trip," Kaslow said in a phone interview, "and I'm convinced Portugal is the place to find one strong enough to cross the Atlantic. This is, after all, the birthplace of the Caravela, and that design helped Magellan's party girdle the globe."

The *Review* editor plans to embark before autumn weather makes sailing passage difficult.

Stephen looked back at the top of the page. He was reading the London *Times* and it was three days old.

"Is that all true?" Wendell grinned, looked eager.

"Well," said Stephen, "it is true that autumn weather makes sailing passages difficult. I missed Magellan's party, so I can't tell you anything about girdling the clone. The rest of it belongs to some press agent who must have overheard a conversation. The *Times* never talked to me."

Wendell picked up only one piece of news from this answer.

"Storms between here and the Azores!" Wendell shook his head and kept to himself whatever else might have come before or after that thought. Then he began to nod, agreeing with Stephen or himself. His soup dribbled back into the bowl with each spoonful; Stephen half expected the level in the bowl to rise.

"What is true is that I'll need a seaworthy boat that won't require much fitting out to be ready to sail. Is the *Phaedra* in that condition?" Stephen waited.

"Look here," said Sidney, ignoring the question and waving his spoon at Stephen as if he were trying to shake it clean. "Let's not muck around. The four of us are sick to death of that bloody little tub. We spent four weeks making our way along the coast of France, across the Bay, and down the coast of Portugal. She is small, the *Phaedra*." He pronounced it *fayderer*. "It's not her fault. But she is small."

"I haven't seen her cabin or hold so I wouldn't know. Some thirty-foot boats are roomy, with plenty of beam and cargo space. And then there are skinny fish that are also thirty foot long with no space at all."

"She's thirty-one foot, almost, and yes, she's skinny, but she's a tough boat too. She's plenty big enough for you, I'd think. Stocked and fitted out the way she is, she's well worth the ten thousand. You could go over her, stem to stern, top and bottom, and we could argue prices, and I'd tell you lies like, 'Of course I trust that diesel.' But we can save each other no small trouble if you'll give me whatever you've got, and I'll give you the *Phaedra* along with the truth."

Sidney brought his elbow up against Wendell's bare ribs and Wendell fished around in a gray canvas bag beside him, peered into the dark interior until he found what he wanted, and passed it to his leader. Sidney set a plastic covered packet of documents before his plate and stood a crooked index finger on top.

"I've got the ship's papers here, and everything's in order. Including the insurance—although it's not much good if you're overtaken by war, implicated in a crime, or visited by an act of God. I'm ready to sell her, now, on one condition."

"What's that?"

"That the sale not be effective till midnight tonight. However, I'll take your money here and now."

Stephen shook his head and leaned back from the table as if he were refusing the offer. "All I've got is five thousand."

"That's fine," said the seller of the *Phaedra*. "I'll take it."

"Oh, really?" He had no idea that Sidney—or all four of them, for that matter—were so eager to get off the boat.

With Sidney accepting half the asking price almost at once, Stephen wondered if the boat were perhaps sinking even now, during dinner, or if it were stolen property.

"I know what you're thinking, Kaslow. I *am* the proper owner of that boat. These papers show it. There is nothing more the matter with it than what you saw at the marina the day you visited Joaquim."

"I didn't get a chance to look at her then. Just the litter on deck and her rigging."

"Then I guess you ought to take me up on my invitation. Come to the boat with us after we're done with dinner. But we'll close the sale now. Right now."

"That would be pretty silly. Pay now and inspect it later?"

"That's the deal." Sidney said it without a smile. "Take it or leave it. You can have a fifteen-thousand-dollar boat for five thousand, now, or look it over and pay me ten."

"I can't pay you ten."

"Precisely."

"But buying the damned thing blind. . ."

"Well, man. Look it over then. And pay me the ten. Right, Wendell?" Sidney turned to his comrade and raised his glass. Wendell shrugged and smiled as if he hadn't been listening, then nodded and kept on crowding his cheeks around the Chou Kai Gu. The waiter removed the untouched soupbowls from the plates of Clea and Wanda. The two women giggled about something.

"Why?" said Stephen.

"Why?"

"Yes. Why such a big penalty for looking? There must be something you don't want me to see."

"On the contrary. There is nothing I have to hide. I *do*, nevertheless, want to be off that boat tonight. And I'll sell it to a fisherman for his stocking cap before I'll board her even once more—after our celebration tonight, of course. I want to be done with the boat—want to know it before we return now. I promised the girls I'd marry them before we quit the trip. As long as I'm captain of the *Phaedra*, and enter it in the ship's log, they'll be happy. If it weren't for the promise, I'd hand her over, lock and stock, right now." Sidney had wandered far from an answer to Stephen's question about the condition of the boat. "That's all," he said with only a little menace. "It's back to you. Do you want the boat for five thousand?"

"I don't think any of that will be legal—your marrying them, I mean." Stephen had ignored Sidney's question to puzzle over the marriage of Clea and Wanda. And then he was embarrassed for having said anything. Sidney smiled so much his beard changed shape. He sat back.

"None of us really cares about the legality. It's the ritual that matters. Right, ladies?" He filled the wine glasses of the two women first, and then of the others, and raised his glass, spilling wine into the fried rice.

"Right!" said Wendell, as if forgetting he wasn't a lady.

The two women stopped chattering and smiled at Sidney. As if one were the mirror of the other, each woman straightened her long sunbleached hair, sipped a little of the wine, set the glass down, and went back to her part in the inaudible dialogue.

Wendell wiped his lips with the back of his hand and

wiped the back of his hand on his bare ribs. He watched Sidney and Stephen intently, as if all bets were laid and nothing was left but to see the cards.

Sidney leaned toward Stephen as if to say something that would move matters to a conclusion.

"Clea's my wife, you know." He leaned back again.

Stephen shook his head as if Sidney were wrong. He was a little more puzzled than he was before. He thought he was going to learn something about the boat, not about Clea.

"I see," said Stephen, although of course, again, he didn't. "And Wanda and Wendell?"

"Just friends," said Sidney.

Stephen looked over at Wendell, who now smiled benignly at the women.

"Oh."

"Well, then. Is it a deal?" Sidney's voice lilted.

"If I gave you the five-thousand, I'd be flat broke. I couldn't even pay my part of the check tonight."

"Give me the fiver. I'll buy your supper."

"Not even a quick look?"

"Not even a quick one."

Stephen took the ten cashier's checks from the folder in his jacket and began to endorse them. He told himself that the next morning, Monday morning, he could stop payment at the bank if things went wrong. It would be embarrassing, but still possible.

Sidney signed a bill of sale he had prepared, and the ship's log. He left a small space just before the record of the sale for a brief account of the evening's traffic.

The group straggled out to the plaza in front of the restaurant. Daylight was almost gone. Some of the cars on the Marginal used high beams now, suggesting they had just come in from the country, while others showed only dim yellow running lights.

Sidney and his crew—including Stephen Kaslow, the new owner of the *Phaedra*, or at least its next scheduled owner and master—all worked their way across the plaza, the Marginal, and down onto the sand beyond the sea wall. A boy and a girl in loose shirts and bare legs seemed ready to leave the beach, but lingered, tightly locked in an embrace beneath the shadow of the stone wall. A fisherman had been caulking his boat. He gathered up his tools and shuffled away.

"What we need right now," Sidney said to the ocean, "is a strong fisherman." He stretched his great arms up in a V, and then brought them back down with satisfaction, opened his loose shirt and with one flat hand patted the skin of his smooth belly—slap, slap, slap.

"Not many coming in any more. It's really too late now," said Stephen. He looked away through the dusk toward the port authority building that sat like a fortress over the water at the far end of the beach.

"No, no. We're in luck. Here's the perfect fellow here." Sidney spoke in loud English to a young man who in his turn smiled and flexed his muscles two or three times, half shrugging and rolling his shoulders in the same motion, suggesting he was ready to take them to their boat, however far out it might lie. Everyone chattered and

laughed as they climbed in around the young man who sat on his bench amidships and smiled up wide-eyed at his passengers. He didn't understand a word they said.

Still on shore, Stephen waited at the bow until everyone gathered at the stern. Their weight raised the nose of the boat. Stephen shoved at the prow while the fisherman pulled on the long oars. The rope oarlocks pinched and creaked against the strain as the boat sluggishly broke free of the sand. Then Stephen hopped up on the front rail, perched there on his knees. The boat quickly settled down, stopped its rocking. The fisherman turned it out toward deep water to pick his way among some of the fifty or more boats moored in the harbor.

He pulled in long sweeping strokes and gave an extra twist to his oars for the benefit of the women staring down at him, facing him from their height at the stern of the boat. Clea said something to Wanda and they giggled. Wendell patted the bare shoulder of the young man and told him with gestures that there was no need to rush, no need to work so hard. Stephen watched the mime from his seat high up in the bow.

There was already a steady breeze from the land and the sky was filling with stars. The top of a full red moon rose over Lisbon, off to their left, as the big rowboat nosed gently against the *Phaedra's* topsides. The fisherman stood and arched his body to hold the *Phaedra's* rail and keep his boat parallel as the passengers boarded the sailboat.

"I've got the wine!" Sidney called, meaning he intended to find it. He crouched in the companionway on his descent into the cabin. Clea followed and led Wanda by the hand into the darkness. Wendell lit a match to help Stephen find his way down the short ladder. Then the match moved on to a kerosene lamp hanging in gimbals from the aft bulkhead. There were shiny tufted cushions that doubled as bunks running along both sides of the cabin.

"And here we are!" Sidney scrambled out of a forward compartment with three large green bottles of wine dangling from the fingers of his left hand. His dark hairy head and the shadows cast by the dull light of the kerosene lamp made him look squat and thick, like a burly monk climbing out of the deepest hold of a wine cellar.

"What do we do?" asked Wendell. Clea reluctantly let go of Wanda's hand.

"Well, I don't know," said Sidney, almost erect now, his head bent slightly forward to clear the cabin ceiling. "But I know what we need most. Ritual's the thing." He stopped and swung around to face the darkness. "Ritual and a corkscrew, that is. In reverse order." His big hand rummaged in a box on the small workbench beside him. He found what he was looking for and began to work on one of the bottles, twisting away at the corkscrew as if it were a valve handle.

"You girls ought to get into costume." Sidney looked for something else in the clutter of dishes and cups in the small galley to his left. He gave up and reached into a dark cabinet above the sink and found what he wanted: a nested set of yellow plastic cups.

"Ignore the plate, if you will," Sidney called out to Stephen.

Clea was helping Wanda undress and in a few minutes the two women stood disrobed before Sidney, who for the moment turned toward the sink to fill the cups with a clear white bubbling wine. He turned back to peer down at the two women.

"Oh. Well. I suppose that is one sort of costume." He looked across to Stephen with an expression that suggested a lot of this would have been more according to good form if there were more time. He shrugged lightly and announced, "*Vinho verde—branco*," taking some pride in his use of Portuguese words to describe the wine.

"Probably not a ritual wine. A bit too champagne. Too 'gay,' if you'll pardon me. Or perhaps too domestic, if you'll pardon me again." Sidney enjoyed this. "But it's the only wine in the house, and we'll pretend the bubbles are for the celebration after." He smiled sweetly at Wanda and Clea as he handed them their cups, then reached around to offer Wendell and Stephen theirs.

While the women had prepared for the ceremony and Sidney exhorted the multitudes, Stephen intently examined the black porthole to his right. He was unnerved. He could see nothing through this window except the glow of the moon rising far off above Lisbon. He stared into the dark, out of some feeling of propriety, until Sidney caught his eye and handed him the wine.

In the pale light of the small lamp Stephen watched the backs of the women, their long bodies with creamy, streaked brown hair falling straight down over their shoulders. They looked like sisters, although Wanda was a little taller and seemed the more withdrawn. Their bodies were completely tanned, without even a pale record of a string bikini. There was probably no reason to dress up at sea, once things had developed into this kind of friendship, or relationship, or whatever this was, thought Stephen. He was titillated by what was going on, a little confused, and wished perhaps that he could go topside and not be there in the cabin at all.

"Now I have here the *Coast and Pilot for 1978*," Sidney was saying, "And it looks like a proper sort of book." He wagged it in his hand while he took a sip from his cup. "A book a captain could read from as he joined into wedlock two such lovely young people as you, Clea, and you, Wanda. What say, Wendell?"

Wendell thought it would be just fine and nodded eagerly. "But they ought to kneel, you know." He blurted things out now. "It would be more . . . 'proper.'" He seemed happy to use a word Sidney had employed, and spent some time over it.

"Yes. Of course. Wendell's right, you know. You ought to kneel, ladies."

The *Phaedra* swayed gently while the two women silently found pillows for their knees and knelt with wine glasses raised, as if they were making an offering. In this case they meant to say that both their glasses were empty.

Sidney stopped to open another bottle of wine and handed it to Wendell, indicating his assistant should keep the cups filled. "Come, fill up the cups!" Sidney pronounced, then bared his teeth and showed with a raising of his upturned hand how the level should rise. Wendell poured, twisting the bottle over each cup elegantly, so that the last drop would roll back into the neck and not a

bit would be lost. Wendell's imitation of a wine steward contrasted with Sidney's earlier geyser-like attack on the empty cups.

"What do you know about marriage, Mr. Kaslow?" Sidney leaned, or teetered, toward the rear of the cabin and squinted into the dark to see if he could make out the expression on Stephen's face.

Stephen thought for a moment. "I guess not very much."

"Yes. Don't we all come to that point sooner or later." Sidney gave this non-question a falling pitch, as if he were old and brought to this pronouncement a sad wisdom. He was about thirty.

"Let me re-phrase my question." Sidney had the air of a barrister to go with the words, or maybe he was more of a judge right now, thought Stephen. "What do you know about weddings?" He had twisted his thumb in one shirt pocket as if he were addressing a courtroom in some country Stephen had never visited.

"I've only been to two or three weddings, and one of them was mine." He thought for a moment. "But I liked that one best, I guess."

"And why was that?" Sidney seemed caught in his role of lawyer.

Stephen tried to think just why he had liked his own wedding best. It wasn't because he had married Margaret. He didn't much care for Margaret anymore. But he did still carry fond memories of his wedding, *their* wedding.

"I think it was the Latin," said Stephen at last. "They were still doing things in Latin in those days."

"Now that is a terribly good point." Sidney beamed. "We need *ritual* here. God knows we're short on everything else. No family to speak of. Except for us, my dear." Sidney raised his wine to Clea. "No vestments. I've got *no* proper vestments." Wendell promptly handed up a long dark towel, a beach towel with some large design on it. Sidney stopped to drape the towel around his shoulders, hunched up several times till it was comfortable—twice striking his head lightly against the ceiling—and went on.

"You girls are stark naked." There was menace in Sidney's voice.

"Yes," said Clea with a gentle sigh and a fond look at Wanda who gazed demurely between her own breasts and into her cup.

"Migawd!" Sidney's smile filled with shadow every crease around his eyes. His lips shone inside his beard. "Having so few of the customary trappings here at our ceremony, I suggest a little of Mr. Kaslow's Latin would go a good way toward lending a certain elegance to the affair. Latin is after all the ancient argot of Holy Mother Church, is it not?"

"Not so much anymore, I don't suppose," said Stephen.

"Well now, I suppose I really wouldn't know. We're all Anglicans here—Church of England, as they say." He wavered, raised his glass and drank again to his companions. "But here we are *all* brothers." Sidney waved his nearly empty cup and spilled a few clear drops on his *Coast and Pilot*. "And sisters," he added.

"Could you get on with it?" asked Clea. She ran her hand smoothly down the backside and thigh of Wanda,

who quivered in response while gazing up at Sidney as if he were a holy man.

"Yes. Yes. Of course. Let's get on with it." Sidney set his yellow cup down on the bench.

"Dearly Beloved," he said at once, "We are gathered here this night to join Clea and Wanda in heavenly matrimony."

Wendell snickered.

"In matrimonial bliss, then." He frowned at Wendell, who did not cower so much as he might have. "Now, Mr. Kaslow, if you'd say something from the Church in Latin."

"Oh, but I don't remember any of it now." He put his hands up helplessly. "I'm really sorry. It's been twenty years."

Everyone turned in surprise and disappointment to look at Stephen.

"Anything in Latin will do. Something from any of the ritual, please."

"It *is* Sunday night," said Stephen.

"*That's* not Latin," Wendell said.

"I was just thinking about what we did on Sunday nights back when I was younger and spent some time in the monastery."

"Were you a priest?" Sidney was struck with delight.

"Oh. No. No. Really. Just a student. Studying to be a priest. But on Sunday nights we'd sing *Compline*, a kind of service we held around supper time, or just after in the early evening. It was often dark like this, about eight or nine o'clock when we'd finished, as I remember." Or was it earlier after a winter sunset? Winter seemed so remote—as long ago as his seminary days. White oak choirs, black cowls, red lamps with candles flickering inside, the smell of stale incense or sweat.

"And so, Brother Kaslow?"

"I was only going to say that that's the only thing I can think of."

"Well, out with it, man! I'm sure it will do."

Stephen smiled faintly, wondering how he'd arrived at this absurd passage—in the dank, stuffy and half-lit cabin of an old wooden boat off the coast of Portugal witnessing, no, *participating* in the wedding of two young women, having paid everything he had in the world for a boat he still had not inspected, for a cruise he did not want to make, for a party or parties he served against his will. Singing Latin suddenly seemed less out of place.

"*Fratres . . .*," Stephen intoned.

"Brothers . . .," Wendell translated.

"Brethren . . ." Sidney corrected the translation for style.

"Look, men," said Stephen. "You'd better let me go straight through with it. It's going to be hard enough just remembering the melody, let alone the words."

"Oh, *well!* I didn't *know* you were going to *sing* it." Sidney gushed.

"Yes. This *is* rich." Wendell showed he could gush too.

Clea and Wanda beamed smiles of approval. Both bent slightly in Stephen's direction and distracted him by the light falling on their breasts.

"It's the only way I can remember it. If I don't sing it, I

can't remember the Latin. The words go with the notes."

"Well, on with it then!"

"*Fratres . . .*" Stephen intoned again, and paused dramatically for effect, the way he and his colleagues had sung it, the way he had sung it each Sunday for what seemed the happiest years of his life. No, he was certain now. They *were* the happiest years of his life.

*“. . . Sobrii estotem et vigiletem.
Tamquam leo rugiens circuit
Quaerens quem devoret.
Cui resistite, fortes in fidem.
Tu, autem, Domine,
Miserere nobis.”*

Everyone was quiet. The boat creaked a few times.

"Sounds like some moor calling from off somewhere in a mosque." Sidney picked up his glass again and raised it in the direction of Stephen. The two women turned toward each other to look back at Stephen in the choir, and smiled their approval.

"That was lovely. So lovely," said Wanda in a throaty, rich alto. Her eyes glinted, watery in the lamp light. Stephen understood why all three were so much in love with her.

"What did he say?" Wendell asked Sidney.

"Yes. What did you say?" Sidney asked Stephen.

"I was afraid of that."

"You mean you don't know?"

"Well, I think I do. On week nights we'd read the same thing in English. But I may have left some of the Latin out or messed up a few of the word-endings. The English doesn't suffer though." He thought that was a little funny, but no one seemed to notice.

"Never mind, man. What's it mean? We're all dying to know."

"It's not very appropriate, I guess." Stephen felt shy now as his mind scanned ahead and looked at the words in English.

"What was it?" Wendell pleaded.

Stephen sipped at his wine, then unconsciously held out the glass for more. As Wendell filled his cup Stephen started to offer the translation. He hoped it was right. Yes, it was. He raised his voice a little.

*"Brethren, be sober and watch,
Because your adversary, the Devil,
Prowls about the world
Like a roaring lion
Seeking the ruin of souls.
Whosoever would resist him
Must be strong in faith.
So You, Lord, please
Have mercy on us.”*

The cabin was silent again except for a long slow creaking. Stephen wiped a drip from the tip of his nose with the back of his wrist. Salt air made his nose run.

"That was simply beautiful," said Clea. She looked back to Stephen with a soft smile, her hand gently resting on the strong curve of Wanda's buttocks.

"Yes. It was," said Wendell. His mouth hung open.
"That was just what we needed. Now we can dispense with the homily. We've had our sermon. But what about the Devil? Where was the Devil in the Latin version?"

Stephen scratched his ear. "Yes, you're right about that. There's a devil only in the English. He's just a lion in the Latin."

"There's a moral for you." Sidney gave him a big wink. "Oh, this is moving right along now." He poked around in the boxes on the workbench. "Need something for a ring. A grommet. A gasket. Or what-not."

"I have one right here." Clea worked a wide gold band off the ring finger of her left hand where there remained only a white line.

Sidney peered down at her hand as the ring came neatly off. With his head bent and his eyes half shut he might have been an old man with bi-focals.

"Yes, you do, don't you?" He showed no emotion. Then cocked his head to one side. "Thought you'd probably like to keep that. As a keepsake, you know."

"Oh, I do," said Clea to her husband. "And I will." She nodded her head as she spoke and looked up at him soberly.

"Yes. Well. Who gets to wear it then?" He scrubbed his beard with one hand.

"Oh, I do," said Wanda. "I mean, I'd like to. If it's all right with you . . .?" Stephen could not hear what she called Clea, but it was a word of tender meaning. Clea shuddered and leaned against Wanda for an instant.

"Of course, Love." Clea straightened up. She slowly moved the ring along Wanda's finger, then folded Wanda's fingers and kissed the closed hand.

"I now pronounce you man and wife," said Sidney abruptly. "Or wife and . . ." He looked a little frantic but still amused at the way he was bumbling this critical moment in the ritual.

"That's a bit silly, I'd say." Wendell's outspoken contribution came from the wine.

"Yes, I suppose it is." Sidney tugged at his beard, shrugged his big shoulders. "I now pronounce you married," he announced.

Clea placed her two hands at the sides of Wanda's face and as their breasts touched she slowly kissed Wanda's parted lips.

"Yes! Well! That's that, then!" Sidney closed his *Coast and Pilot* with a thud and raised one hand. "Everyone up top but the newlyweds!" He grabbed a squat red bottle from a cupboard by the sink.

As the two men left, Clea and Wanda continued to kiss on the floor of the *Phaedra's* cabin. Last man in the file, Sidney slid the companionway hatch shut and took a long swig from the bottle of cognac.

"Let's go sailing," he said to Wendell and jabbed him lightly in the ribs, "For a last time." He handed the bottle to Stephen, and lifted a huge sail out of the cockpit locker.

"Hundred-fifty-percent Genoa," Sidney explained to Stephen and patted the sail. "Especially fine for night ghosting." Then Sidney tossed the big bundle to Wendell who went up forward to bend on the foresail.

"You might raise the iron while I work this mainsail up."

"Where's it stowed?" Stephen called out a minute later as he knelt in the dark near the bow pulpit, drawing on the anchor line.

"Just a little cradle under the prow. Reach under. You'll feel it." Sidney was drawing in long strokes on the main halyard and the sail climbed the mast in rattling billows.

A few moments later, the anchor neatly stowed, the *Phaedra's* two sails aloft, the boat swung downwind and out to sea on a steady but gentle breeze from the land. As they left the harbor of Cascais the moon rode high above the glow of Lisbon. The black water reflected the light that silhouetted other sailboats and fishing trawlers moored in the harbor. And then they were away. Coasting along smoothly under the big gennie at almost the same speed as the breeze, there was little feeling of movement—just the lap lap lap of the bow cutting across small waves on the flat ocean.

Later Sidney gave the tiller to Stephen, who sat with the stub tucked under his arm and smoked. They were silent for a long time. Wendell lay up forward stretched out on his belly beneath the big sails, his head on one arm.

Sidney broke the silence.

"Do you really believe in the Devil, Stephen?" Sidney watched Stephen's face from the seat opposite Stephen, the dark bottle tucked under his arm.

Stephen smiled.

"My grandmother did," he said. "She saw him pretty often when she was older."

"But you. Do *you* believe in the Devil?"

"About as much as I believe in God, I guess." Stephen thought for a moment, still with a quiet smile. "It seems to me that I see them both more often—in one shape or another—the older I get. I guess if I had to believe in anything on the basis of the evidence, I'd believe in the existence of the Devil first." He threw his cigarette onto the black water. Sidney was silent.

"But I wouldn't say I *believed* in him, in the Devil. Not the way one *believes* in God. I'd rather have as little to do with the Devil as possible. But one can't always choose his friends."

Sidney was still quiet, perhaps dozing now with his arms folded across his broad chest, still hugging the bottle.

Stephen watched the compass heading and reflected on Sidney's question. Perhaps he had left the seminary when he was younger because he couldn't see either of them clearly any longer—God or the Devil—not, that is, with the clarity his grandmother offered him when he was a boy. Well, there was nothing unusual about that. As people often said, children and old folks were always closer to God, having just left Him or being well on their way to joining Him in heaven.

And affirming your belief in the Devil was just one way to declare your allegiance to God.

Then Stephen wondered if he had much control over the progress of his faith. He supposed it had more to do with the disposition, the condition, or the age of his chemistry, and not much to do with practice, habit, the shape and form of ritual. □

BRIAN SWANN

FOSSIL MOVES

Pickaxe not ice gouged this
quarry floor sloping to water, where

A dead oak rises from a calyx
of new pines; sepal and stalk.

Fish swim across the pearl sun.
Air drops down sculpted rock—

Walls, gathering minute intensities,
alive at all frequencies. The sun

Tangles in a thin steel mesh, where
a man, still as winter, traces frost

In a boulder, watching if all parts
of everything are occupied, even

The soul. How everything is not
told, but revealed, if at all,

Like a person's real name. Like
the soul with its bryozoan anatomy,

Not one thing, but a colony clustered
as one being, between this and

That, unaffined with any other
group, living once in clear moving

Waters at variable depths, growing
on shells and pebbles, forming

Delicate encrustations. But then,
having budded to extinction along

Shores exposed after unusually high
tides in their chitinous sheen, they are

Now dust under an eye harried by
the quarry pond shivering glass

All round and up into the rock-
face, pulling in the air, turning

Rock to ice, fossilizing as glare
all that moves, or wants to move.

BARBARA FIALKOWSKI

OUT OF OUR ELEMENT

For Chris

You breathe too soon,
your eyes surfacing
like a frog's. I hold

you close to my belly
thinking of those days
you swam in there,

a tadpole, dark
as a memory. Your father
and I once sailed

on a farmpond, dreaming
we were shedding
the drowning we'd known

since birth. I looked
into those waters
as now into your eyes,

deep to where the soul
might be swimming,
a large mouth bass,

his scales catching
light. But there,
on the surface,

I saw myself. You are
as foreign to me
as the pond that night.

Now, at one year,
it's already too late.
Too early you catch

your breath, and we
splash fiercely at what
we can't hold onto.

Jailbird, by Kurt Vonnegut. Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence. \$9.95

It is one of those "accidents" Vonnegut is so fond of telling us about that the release of his new novel, *Jailbird*, and the professional theatre opening of *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* in Manhattan occurred nearly simultaneously this fall. Both, in their kooky and kind ways, are stories about our economy, probably very much like the science fiction novel Kilgore Trout is writing from prison at the end of *Jailbird*.

The *Rosewater* production is an adaptation of the 1965 novel, in which Eliot Rosewater boozily runs a volunteer fire department and administers the estate of his wealthy family by giving away money to the "useless people" of Rosewater County in Indiana. Kilgore Trout is in that novel, too, as Eliot's favorite science fiction writer, an avowed socialist who is a free-enterpriser "through no choice of [his] own." At the novel's end, Eliot is seemingly inspired by Trout—and by the question of a bird ("Poo-tee-weet?") in the garden of a mental institution—to prove his sanity and save the Rosewater millions from the selfish grasp of the Rhode Island wing of the family. His solution: declare himself the father of all the useless children in Rosewater County so they will inherit his fortune.

There are birds in a garden in *Jailbird*, too. Only this time, the garden is the penthouse of the Chrysler Building in New York, the paradise showroom of the American Harp Company, owned by the RAMJAC Corporation, "a place of unearthly beauty and peace within the building's stainless-steel crown." Inhabiting the seventy feet of space beneath the crown are "Myriads of bright yellow little birds . . . perched on the girders, or flitting through the prisms of light admitted by the bizarre windows, by the great triangles of glass that pierced the crown." Beneath the crown is a vast floor carpeted in grassy green and furnished with a fountain, garden benches, statues, "and here and there a harp." The birds are prothonotary warblers who have multiplied from the two set free in 1931 to preside over this paradise prison. It is

Vonnegut the Diviner & Other Auguries

significant that a meaning of prothonotary is "a priest of the chief college of the papal curia who keeps records of consistories and canonizations." It is also significant that this setting is a haven for Mary Kathleen O'Looney, a Manhattan shopping bag lady who is the chief female protagonist in the novel.

Because—you guessed it—this setting is the Paradise of the divine capitalistic comedy Vonnegut creates in *Jailbird*. His Dante is Walter Starbuck, whose story is the autobiography of a son of immigrants adopted by their millionaire employer—a pathological stutterer, made so after witnessing the massacre of protesting iron workers at his father's iron works in 1894. The accidental shaping of Walter's life by this event is one in a series that sends him to Harvard, where he becomes a temporary idealistic Communist and runs a radical newspaper; to Washington, where he works for the government and inadvertently betrays his best friend in a pre-McCarthy investigation, and eventually to prison, where he goes as an accidental victim of Watergate. And we remember that Dante, too, held a government position in Florence and was convicted of an improbable charge of graft. Like Walter, his best friend was arrested and banished by the government Dante served.

Walter's Beatrice is Mary Kathleen, his first lover, a volunteer writer for his radical paper when he was a student at Harvard. He has forgotten her until he accidentally meets her as the shopping bag lady at the intersection of Forty-Second Street and Fifth Avenue in Manhattan on the day he is released from prison at age 64. Unbeknownst to Walter, she is disguised

so no one will know she is the owner of the RAMJAC Corporation. The melodrama of this meeting swells with the simultaneous encounter he has with the friend he betrayed, Leland Clewes. This bizarre trio takes on an additional zany edge from our knowledge that Leland has married another former sweetheart of Walter, Sarah Wyatt, whose father owned the clock company in whose employ Mary's mother was accidentally poisoned by the radium used to paint the faces of the clocks.

And there's more, smooth as syrup in pure Vonnegut vintage, crafted to near perfection: Walter's Virgil, the voice of reason, is not Virgil Greathouse, the corrupt Secretary of State who enters prison the day of Walter's release. Rather, it is probably Bob Fender, the ex-veterinarian mistakenly sentenced to life for treason, who is chief clerk—another prothonotary warbler—and listens to old Edith Piaf records in the prison where Walter is incarcerated as the novel begins. Fender, under the pseudonym of Kilgore Trout, writes the science fiction stories that elucidate Walter's autobiography—that is, the novel.

The Inferno of this not-so-divine comedy is the empty catacombs beneath Grand Central Station, the graveyard garage for defunct steam locomotives, the elegant machines that made free enterprise work. And it's also another secret haven for Mary Kathleen, because she fears for her life. Her fear is legitimate, since she is really the widow of Jack Graham, a union leader who left her a fortune. This is the fortune she is using to fulfill the socialist dream inspired by Kenneth Whistler, the union organizer who spoke in Cambridge when she and Walter were young idealists. It is a dream she never forgot and is determined to fulfill as owner of the RAMJAC Corporation. Her mission? To buy up the American economy and give it back to the people.

And what is the Gospel that makes it all work? "The Sermon on the Mount, sir." Every kind person Mary finds is immediately made a vice president of a firm owned by RAMJAC. The titular head of the Corporation is Arpad Leen, whose service to Mary Kathleen is a "reli-

gious experience,” and who buys up whatever she tells him by phone.

And does it *really* work? No, of course not. It turns out to be another Great Ponzi Scheme. Walter learns about Ponzi schemes from Dr. Carlo di Sanza, a Doctorate in Law from the University of Naples who is a naturalized American citizen serving his second term at Walter’s prison for using the mails to defraud. Dr. di Sanza is ferociously patriotic and has made many people happy and rich. He offers fools enormous rates of interest for the use of their money, uses it to buy luxuries for himself, returns part of the money as the high interest he promised, gets more money from grateful investors to write more interest checks—“and on and on.”

Walter is moved to suppose “that every successful government is of necessity a Ponzi scheme.” And indeed, two years following Mary’s accidental death (after she is hit by a taxi probably owned by RAMJAC) the great corporation crumbles. Her beneficiary, the American people via the government, takes over RAMJAC and hires twenty thousand bureaucrats, half of them lawyers, to oversee the job of selling off the corporation to the highest bidders. The highest bidders are foreign investment firms. “There are plenty of dollars, it turns out, to buy all the goodies the federal government has to sell . . . There was a photograph on an inside page of the *Daily News* yesterday of a dock in Brooklyn. There was about an acre of bales that looked like cotton on the dock. These were actually bales of American currency from Saudi Arabia, cash on the barrelhead, so to speak, for the McDonald’s Hamburgers Division of RAMJAC. The headline said this: ‘HOME AT LAST!’” And these dollars will serve Americans at home with new roads, military equipment, and partial payment of the national debt.

And Walter, after successfully running his Down Home Records division of RAMJAC for the two years following Mary Kathleen’s death, will be sent to prison again for committing a class E felony: unlawfully concealing Mary’s will.

* * *

The Purgatorio of Vonnegut’s comedy is the limbo of life, the literal and figurative prison where the air is “unacceptable” and where all the

folks of the novel live or have lived their mythical or actual lives. And there are a lot of folks: there are no fewer than 215 entries in the Index of *Jailbird*, from “Adam” to “Zola, Emil.” They all help contribute to the development of the existential theme of absurdity—of the indifference of nature and of humans to fellow humans. A limbo where “The economy is a thoughtless weather system—and nothing more. Some joke on the people, to give them such a thing.” It is a theme Vonnegut has played before, but which he plays now with a new variation: the role of women.

This is the first of his novels with so strong a female protagonist. She is a parody of Beatrice to be sure, the bizarre Mary Kathleen who wears immense purple and black basketball shoes containing love letters, stock certificates, and her will, among other valuables. One of her most treasured secrets is the row of toilets in her private catacomb beneath Grand Central: “You know there are millions of poor souls out on the street,” she tells Walter, “looking for a toilet somebody will let them use?” Nonetheless, she represents faith, hope and love. She never forgot the impassioned speech of Kenneth Whistler back in Walter’s Harvard days when she was only 18: “. . . Whistler promised us that the time was at hand for workers to take over their factories and to run them for the benefit of mankind. Profits that now went to drones and corrupt politicians would go to those who worked, and to the old and the sick and the orphaned. . . .” Mary had told Walter, back in their youth, that he would be just like Whistler, but Walter, now in his sixties, confesses that the most distressing thing about his autobiography “is its unbroken chain of proofs that I was never a serious man. I have been in a lot of trouble over the years, but that was all accidental. Never have I risked my life, or even my comfort, in the service of mankind. Shame on me.”

Mary, however, *was* serious. After Walter left Harvard and forgot her, she had hitchhiked to Kentucky to help Whistler in the coal mines. There she met her husband, Jack Graham, whose legacy she used to begin her corporation. She is growing old and tired, but her chance meeting with Walter after all those years has renewed her. “I’ll rescue you, Walter

. . . Then we’ll rescue the world together.” And rescue him she does, at least temporarily, from another accidental arrest in the American Harp paradise where she has taken him. Then she makes new vice presidents of RAMJAC out of him and all the people who had been kind to him on the day he left prison.

There are those who see Dante’s *Comedy* as a reflection of 14th century Florentine and European life fraught with the evils of Church, State, and individuals in need of the redeeming powers of reason and divine love. If Vonnegut’s *Jailbird* is a parodied allegory of that allegory, it, too, is a reflection of 20th century life in Washington, New York, and a United States where old drunks are burned alive by teenagers on Skid Row, where the child of an impoverished mother is ravaged by the watch dog left to protect it, where Sacco and Vanzetti are wrongfully executed and forgotten, and where corrupt and uncaring educational, religious, and political institutions have failed in their responsibilities to the people.

If “Kilgore Trout” is Virgil, his science fiction warns us about the planet Vicuna where people ran out of time after having “found ways to extract time from topsoil and the oceans and the atmosphere—to heat their homes and power their speedboats and fertilize their crops . . . and a million years of future were put to the torch in honor of the birthday of the queen.” He questions quasi-religious interpretations of life in his “sacrilegious story,” “Asleep at the Switch,” in which people trying to get into heaven must submit to a full review of how they mis-handled the business opportunities God offered them on earth. The hero is the ghost of Albert Einstein, chastised by a heavenly public accountant because he failed to invest money in uranium before telling the world that $E=Mc^2$. The point the public accountant is trying to make is that Einstein’s life had been fair, that he shouldn’t blame God because he had been “asleep at the switch.” Such a voice of “reason” is perhaps the only one that makes sense in the absurdity of 20th century America, where time and money and the power of fossil fuels are the values which seem to blind humans to faith, hope, and love.

* * *

A person not so blinded in *Jailbird*

is Mary Kathleen. Walter, as Dante, says that he believes women are "more spiritual, more sacred than men." All four women he has loved, he says, "seemed more virtuous, braver about life, and closer to the secrets of the universe than I could ever be." Two of those women were his sweethearts, Mary and Sarah; a third was Ruth, his wife. The Biblical versions of all three, we remember, have their place of honor at the highest circle of heaven in the 32nd Canto of Dante's "Paradiso." And the fourth woman Walter loved was Anna Kairys Stankiewicz, his mother. In Dante's poem, Anna, the mother of the Virgin Mary, sits at the feet of the Lord.

As Dante was inspired by his love for Beatrice in his youth, and redeemed by her in his poem, so Walter receives atonement from Mary, his first lover, not in Paradise but in the underground cavern of Grand Central where she is dying: "You couldn't help it that you were born without a heart," she tells him. "At least you tried to believe what the people with hearts believed—so you were a good man just the same."

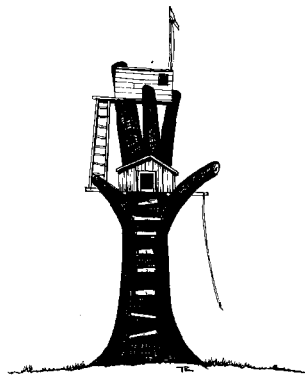
Walter gives Mary a decent burial under her maiden name, so it will not be known that Mrs. Jack Graham, the owner of RAMJAC, has died. And for two years he serves, with considerable comfort, as vice president of the Down Home Records division of RAMJAC that Mary has given him. Down Home Records owns Gulf & Western, *The New York Times*, Universal Pictures, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, Dell Publishing (Vonnegut's own paperback publisher), the Marlborough Gallery, and Associated American artists, among other enterprises. During his vice presidency, his division and its subsidiaries win "eleven platinum records, forty-two gold records, twenty-two Oscars, eleven National Book Awards, two American League pennants, two National League pennants, two World Series, and fifty-three Grammys—and we never failed to show a return on capital of less than 23 percent." But then, by a bizarre coincidence, Mary's death is discovered and Walter's fortune is eaten up by lawyer's fees.

At a party in his honor, the night before he is to be sent to prison for the third time, Walter is surrounded by his new friends, all recent vice presidents of RAMJAC because of their

kindness to him. He becomes depressed by their levity, especially in the face of how the corporation is being devoured by "foreigners and criminals and endlessly greedy conglomerates," to say nothing of the new government bureaucracy administering Mary's legacy to the people.

So Walter attempts to behave as though he were the good man Mary said he was: "You know what is finally going to kill this planet?" he asks his friends. "A total lack of seriousness . . . Nobody gives a damn anymore about what's really going on, what's going to happen next, or how we ever got into such a mess in the first place." And indeed, not one of his friends will either be serious or take him that way, so he gives up on saying anything serious and tells a joke.

Which, of course, is Vonnegut's own ploy: to try to say something



serious by telling a joke. And, of course, it works. Like his protagonist, Walter, Vonnegut knows the cynicism and carelessness of the American public.

John Ciardi, hardly a fan of Vonnegut, once wrote a two-part essay for *Saturday Review* (May 15, 1965) entitled "700 Years After: The Relevance of Dante." In it Ciardi, who has done a fine translation of *The Divine Comedy*, said that "Dante will remain relevant to mankind for exactly as long as those values we call the humanities are relevant to it."

"If in some future time the nations of this world turn to systematic indoctrination of their people, making them over into the automatons of a self-justifying technology, then, of course, these meditative and intuitive perceptions for which we honor Dante will have been dismissed as an antiquarian idiocy, and he can have, at best, only a bootleg existence

among the outcasts of society or among the secretly subversive."

In his essay Ciardi recognized that the future he dreaded had a likelihood of fulfillment, and certainly Vonnegut writes critically of such self-justifying technology in *Jailbird*—and in other novels as well. Mr. Ciardi undoubtedly knows by now that the humanities are not faring well in American universities, and, alas, that Dante is not at the top of many reading lists today. Vonnegut is. At this writing, *Jailbird* has joined other Vonnegut novels of the past as number one on the best seller list. This probably gives Mr. Ciardi fits; in a scathing article in the September 30, 1967 *Saturday Review*, he attacked Vonnegut's *New York Times Book Review* piece on summer writing conferences, and implied that Vonnegut was a hack writer who "writes like a slob and thinks like a blob."

So it is ironic to imagine that Vonnegut may be one of those outcasts or secret subversives who still honors Dante, and who recognizes his relevance enough to transpose Dante's perceptions into an idiom that maybe, just *maybe*, even a corporate capitalist of the 20th century would read and be moved by. Certainly if there is a literary moralist writing today, it's Vonnegut. Although he has gone to considerable length to explain that he did not receive formal training in literature, he is hardly illiterate in the humanities. (Indeed, if my students know something about all the people listed in the Index to *Jailbird*, I would guess they would come close to having what we call a liberal arts education.)

Vonnegut writes for and of a culture in which the Sermon on the Mount is seen as naïve sentimentality. It is a culture in which the President wrongly thinks he has control of a real steering wheel. It is a culture which insists upon burning time with no thought for the future, a culture in which the air is unacceptable, and in which impoverished old women live out of shopping bags on the streets of our cities.

Despite elitist critics who are either embarrassingly unable or unwilling to understand, Vonnegut continues to insist that we give a damn about what's really going on. And he does so in a delightfully imaginative and coherent form. *Jailbird* is his best novel since *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

—Loree Rackstraw

Earned Praise

Black Tickets, by Jayne Anne Phillips. Delacorte/Lawrence, \$8.95 (Paper, Delta, \$4.95)

A great deal of attention has been paid to *Black Tickets*. The book has been reviewed favorably in places like *Harper's*, *Newsweek*, and the *New York Times*. *Newsweek* did a sidebar interview with Jayne Anne Phillips, in which she talked about her West Virginia childhood, her writing ("Real writers serve their material. They allow it to pass through them and have the opportunity to move beyond the daily limitations of being inside themselves. It's like being led by a whisper."), and names writers who have influenced her (such as O'Connor, Faulkner, Márquez).

The back cover of the book quotes eight writers—Tillie Olsen, Rosellen Brown, Raymond Carver, Robie Macauley, others—who for one reason or another greatly admire *Black Tickets*. At 27, Phillips has had two previous collections of her stories: *Sweethearts* (Truck Press, 1976 and 1978), and *Counting* (Vehicle Editions, 1978.) But this present book is, as they say, her first major publication.

There are 27 stories in *Black Tickets*; sixteen are very short, a page and a half or less. These short pieces are interesting and flashy, sometimes overwrought and sometimes successful. Altogether, they don't satisfy as much as the longer stories in this collection. Any of them might be marvelous read aloud: already strong in voice, compressed in language, their associations would become richer with pauses and inflection. The best of them ("Stripper," "Cheers," "Slave," "Solo Dance") have a sense of being spoken wholly all in one breath, and have a feeling of desperate necessity:

When I was fifteen back in Charleston, my cousin Phoebe taught me to strip. She was older than my mother but she had some body. When I watched her she'd laugh, say That's all right Honey sex is sex. It don't matter if you do it with monkeys. Yeah she said, You're white an dewy an tickin like a time bomb an now's the time to learn. ("Stripper")

The longer stories show more range, take bigger risks, and mostly

succeed at what they try. The best have at their center a young woman who makes contact, or misses it, with one of her parents. In "Home," the young woman returns to her mother and the intimacies that are possible, and impossible, for them; in "The Heavenly Animal," an almost parallel story about a young woman and her father, the man tries to share his life with his daughter—the Catholic senior citizens meal, repairs on her car, anything—and none of it works. Her parents are bitterly divorced. She learned to drive his car in a cemetery, which just about says everything. In "Souvenir," a mother is dying but still has the greater courage; she comforts her daughter.

The strength in these stories is that even narrative gives way to necessity: honesty gets more time than forced technique; language is simple and essential, not flashy; and even the hard truth, the cruel one, gets telling. So, incidentally, does the absurd one. In "Home," the narrator's lover can't find a place to put the rubber after they've made love in her childhood bedroom with her mother downstairs.

We put our clothes on fast and Daniel moves to dispose of the rubber—how? the toilet, no, the wastebasket—He drops it in, bends over, retrieves it. Finally he wraps it in a kleenex and puts it in his pocket. Jesus, he swears. He looks at me and grins. When I start laughing, my eyes are wet.

"Home" is one of the best stories. It goes somewhere deep into a thing between two people, and touches the mystery of the sad ways we cannot, ever, be together. The lover has a scar he won't let the narrator see. The mother reveals her scarred body to the daughter matter-of-factly, after her shower, suggesting other and worse invisible wounds.

The invisible wounds get both voice and time in some of Phillips's less narrative stories. "Lechery" is a white hot meditation on lust by a 14-year-old prostitute:

I do things they've never seen, I could let them touch but no. I arrange their hands and feet, keep them here forever. Sometimes they tell me stories, they keep talking of baseball games and vicious battles with their friends. Lips pouty and soft, eyes a hard glass glitter. They lose the words and mumble like babies; I hold them just so, just tight. I sing the oldest songs.

That's an invisible wound, or the girl is all wound, like a wound from Kafka, suppurating, nightmarish, lifelong. And yet the girl is somehow forgiven. ("I'm pure, driven snow.") I like that forgiveness, and I like Phillips for making me feel it.

"El Paso," a chorus of five voices, is a meditation on the pure grotesquerie of lust. "Black Tickets" gives the voice of a jailed man who recalls his sexual obsession for the woman who set him up. "Gemcrack" puts the reader uncomfortably, horribly, inside the mind of a mass murderer—rather like roiling around inside Berkowitz. I like "Gemcrack" the least of the stories—not because it fails in technique (it doesn't), or in language (the writing is feverish, obsessive), but because something recoils at putting poetry in this mind, this voice. There's something obscene to it, even when the poetry suggests—as it does here—a larger social sickness, a killing alienation.

The stories are not cheerful.

Not cheerful, but worthy. Even, sometimes, tender. They refuse sentimentality. They work in voice, poetry, dream logic.

Ankles above the shoes are strung thin and tuned to recite. Though I see only tops of heads, female heads smaller than the metal caps of straight pins, I remember the ankles: their nylon sheen, the round bones rising up to glint like a covered eye. ("Gemcrack")

I'm fine until he coughs. Then I head for the bathroom. I might grab the chamber pot under his chair and carry its sloshing contents in my flight. I might sprout wings, nearly run up the dark hall holding a squat chalice engraved with angels. His tiled bathroom smells of churches. ("The Patron")

Jamaica Delila, how I want you; your smell a clean yeast, a high white yogurt of the soul. ("Black Tickets")

This is a prose of accident and image that is often exactly suited to its subject. It's no surprise to learn that Phillips wrote poetry before she wrote prose. Now, she says (in *Newsweek*), "Poets can become good, energetic writers of prose. They've already learned to condense language."

And also, "I'm interested in what home now consists of. Families are forced to be immediate; they must stand on their relationships. . . ." The stories about families are the best ones in this book, if only perhaps

because connection and need between people tied by blood might go deeper, and resonate more, than fevered monologues, and might drive home harsher than a bullet. But there are many things in this book: inventiveness, risk-taking, range, language that at its best sticks to the essential and doesn't waste time. *Black Tickets* is an impressive collection.

—Mary Peterson

Making It: An Afterword

Just about everyone I know writes. I don't mean people who stand around at cocktail parties looking literary. I mean folks who leave those parties early because they have work to do the next morning, and the work is often done alongside teaching or editing jobs, the work that pays to support the work that doesn't.

These people are good, committed writers, and for one reason or another—a false turn in the work, bad advice, or just simple poor luck—they haven't hit, struck it, made a debut of any sort, become a success.

But if you write, as soon as you use the word success you're in trouble.

I think it takes nothing away from Jayne Anne Phillips—or it should take nothing away—to speak about success in the light of hers, to talk about what it means and can't mean to all of us who write. A writer taking on this subject runs a risk of being accused of sour grapes. There's a bit of that. Some moments, with writing friends, I've said, and meant, "We're all animals, and we're all ruthless." But I don't feel it often. With the recent overdue success (all successes seem overdue) of a friend who is 34, a housewife, a writer who just had her novel accepted and got a healthy advance (her third novel; her first acceptance) I felt, thank God, a sudden and immediate sense of relief and pleasure. The depression came later. It was an old familiar depression. Not for this writer—she deserves what she's earned, and she'd had the guts and doggedness to work on her book, believe in her book, through the many bad times. It was a depression for the rest of us: those in the immediate circle of writers I know now, and even for the ones I knew at the Iowa Writers' Workshop (1975-1976) who were talented and deserving. Of 50 talented people that year, I've

since seen in print the names of five, perhaps eight. There are likely a few more. Some others are probably not writing. The rest are still "unknowns."

It's not a bad thing to be—unknown. Expectations are lower and writing freedom is greater. Though it's also lonely. And we wouldn't write—any of us—if at some level we didn't want an audience and recognition. Back at Iowa those days, when several of us played pool in a bar and truck stop, we all sang along when Glen Campbell's "Rhinstone Cowboy" came on the radio. Something like this:

There'll be a load of compromising
On the road to my horizon
But I'm gonna be where the lights are
shinin on me
Like a rhinstone cowboy
Ridin out on a horse in a star-spangled
rodeo
Like a rhinstone cowboy



Gettin cards and letters from people I
don't even know
And offers comin over the phone . . .

I haven't spoken with Jayne Anne Phillips, and I haven't met her, but I can guess she's getting the cards and letters, the invitations, also the phone calls. She's a gifted writer, and as I said and must say again to nail it down, she deserves it.

* * *

And the rest of the people writing?

Iowa, I suspect, wasn't that different from any writing school where people take the work seriously, agents visit to check out the new crop, famous writers read to the ones who want to be famous, where connections and contacts and names are made and careers launched. At Iowa that year there was one suicide, and many failures, and many bitter people. But this, too, isn't so very

different from graduate work in a high powered medical school, say, where—a young internist relative tells me—they've had a suicide already this year, and many dropouts. You invest everything you've got; you become convinced it isn't enough. Your future, as they used to tell me, is at stake.

A friend who was also my writing teacher at Iowa used to tell me, "Shut up and do your work." That was my continual effort. It was tough. It's hard to forget there's a public out there, and money, and fame, and sometimes even power. In the hot, alchemical world of writing and nothing but writing it's easy to overestimate the range of that power, the extent of that fame. When this writing teacher returned to Iowa a year later to give a reading, she said afterward she'd been met at the airport by six people. She'd had commercial successes that year. The students who met her were strange, she said.

"They were all so—"

"Hungry," I interrupted.

"That's the word," she said.

The problem, of course, is belief in the brass ring. That it's out there. That you can get it. That getting it matters.

And what troubles me about the debut success of a young talented writer like Jayne Anne Phillips—or anyone else—is that the sudden recognition in the *New York Times*, or *Newsweek*, isn't really sudden at all—she's worked for it—but seems so, seems overnight, makes a pop star, a media queen, of a talented writer, and makes everybody hungry all over again.

Deadly hungry for a thing nearly impossible to get. Most of us know the statistics. As inflation gets worse, they get worse. They have to do with the shelf life of a new book being sixteen weeks, and with remaindering, and with printing books on paper that disintegrates in a decade or two. As Robie Macauley said in 1977 at the Saranac Writers' Conference, the odds against publication are about 2,000 to one for a novel, 900 to one for a story in *Playboy*, and 600 to one for the little magazines. Nobody in Las Vegas, he said, would bother to bet. That's against *publication*, never mind success.

This is the reality of writing for most of us. Overnight stardom doesn't help it. Though it's good for all of us that Phillips, who (using the

jargon) writes a "literary" instead of a "commercial" prose, has gotten rave reviews in big magazines. I'd like to hope that says something important about the direction and appreciation of writing. Just as wider respect of quarterlies says something about where real literature is to be found in America these days. Yet: Phillips published her stories in magazines like *Attaboy*, *Big Deal IV*, and *Truck Magazine*. Mention those names to middle class America and they'll think you're talking about something sold at Sears. Mention them in English departments, where literature is supposed to be studied and appreciated, and so far you won't do much better.

I think we have to remember some of the oldest lessons. The bromides. Such as, the real debut happens when we sit down in the morning and try, again, to knock upon silence. That we do our work out of love. That success is a gorgeous afterthought, but not the true center of the work.

I know a man who does a compulsive daily word count and keeps monthly charts; a woman who sends out short stories so many times she must iron the manuscripts to make them look fresh again. He's in his 50's, got a Pulitzer when he was 28, and is still counting words. She's published widely in the quarterlies, and is still ironing.

In our time, there's a real mine field of hype and flash; negotiating it through obscurity and success is a writer's sad business. But if making it becomes the only business, pushes aside the true work, then something dismal happens to art, and something sorry to writing.

"I'm pleased to receive prizes," John Cheever said recently in the *New York Times Magazine*, "because it makes life so much easier for other people. When one meets a stranger, he's inclined to be anxious, but if you've got the Pulitzer Prize, you're rather like Shredded Wheat. They don't worry." I don't think that's affectation talking. I think that's good writing sense.

"A writer," E.B. White said, "is a wing shot." Every morning you get another chance to take good aim. Those people in the blinds—knowns and unknowns—are the true community of writers. We know who they are. It does us well to remember it.

—M.P.

STEPHEN DOBYNS

PABLO NERUDA

Pablo Neruda stands on a corner next to a poster advertising quick weight loss diet aids when I happen by with half my creative writing class. He wears a black boating cap and blue cloak draped loosely over one shoulder, and he stands very still staring at the clouds where he probably sees the profiles of famous poets. At his feet lies a small brown dog. We had heard he was dead and so are surprised and walk around him several times. He has nice fat cheeks and after a moment I reach out and touch one, but gently and he doesn't notice. I look at my students and I can tell they're ready for anything so I take out my Swiss army knife, open the littlest blade and cut Pablo a tiny bit on the left arm. He doesn't even blink but I think he begins to concentrate more intently on the clouds. By now my students are becoming excited so I open a bigger blade and carefully cut a sliver of flesh from his shoulder. I put it on my tongue and it's very sweet with a faint taste of smoke. I chew it slowly. Glancing at the sky it now seems a deeper blue. My students see me smiling and licking my lips and they too take out Swiss army knives and start cutting off small slices, although they don't stay small for long, because suddenly we are ravenous. It feels like I haven't eaten for days. I barely pause to chew my food and I grow angry at my students for pushing and getting aggressive over the more succulent bits. One even eats the brown dog. In practically no time there's nothing left but a quickly folded pile of clothes on the sidewalk with the black cap on top. Then we all become embarrassed and won't look at each other because we've eaten this famous poet, and even though he tasted great and we could probably eat another, and even though the city seems brighter and more exciting than before, we still feel ashamed to have surrendered so completely to such animal passions so we point to our watches and make excuses and stroll off in our separate directions, but shortly, outside a movie theater, I see one of my students offering herself to the people waiting in line; then I see another accosting a crowd at a bus stop; and a little later in the lobby of a convention hotel I see a third bothering the legionnaires. And you, now that I have your attention at last, ignore these imposters. They're too hungry to be telling the truth. Feel this arm, this fat thigh. Why would I cheat you? Even now the moon grows more swollen and the stars throb deep in their black pockets. Bite me, bite me.

In Paris on September 8, 1979, Jean Seberg, 40 years of age, was discovered dead, her naked body wrapped in the same blanket she was wrapped in when she walked out on her apartment and 29-year-old actor Ahmed Hasme, her fourth husband, ten days before. Naked she went into the night, swathed in this blanket and armored with some prescription drug—Valium, Seconal, what? (The news report didn't say.) Then, beside this grisly bundle on the floor of the back seat of her car, parked not far from where she lived, was an empty bottle of mineral water, and that empty container that had held the substance she got permanently off on. She was dead, apparently by her own hand, and, according to the state of decomposition of the body (the police report said), perhaps even on the very night she fled.

Events are oddly and not always pleasantly synchronistic. Three months ago I wrote about the movie "Lilith," in which Jean Seberg starred. "On the surface," I said, "it's a picture about people who are insane, who have sought a refuge there from the terrors of so-called reality . . . but, on another level, it is also a picture that probes what insanity is." And, later on: ". . . upstairs the certified crazy Lilith (Jean Seberg, succubus and witch too) has made of her room (her space) a beauty, a triumph, a symmetry, all out of her fantastic unreality . . . or is it reality—"

There was a love scene in "Lilith," of course (in fact there were several disparate ones), done—of course—in the nonexplicit style of that time. But the big one was between Warren Beatty and Jean, the two stars. It was—compared to what has been on the screen since—pretty tame, the two actors seen only from the shoulders up, rolling around on the ground, breathing heavily. It was also as prudent and decent a scene as all of us would have expected Jean Seberg to play. Never one of those who let it all hang out, she came on as a friendly, pretty, 24-year-old Iowa young woman (*girl* we said in those days). Whatever horrors she had endured at Preminger's hands on "Saint Joan" and "Bonjour Tristesse" she never talked about. But we all knew she didn't like Preminger—for sure.

Then, not to say there had not

Remembrances of Things Past

been a lot of *sturm und drang* about the love scene before the love scene was shot (there was, in fact, little love lost between the two participants in the real [?] world outside the movie), a day or two after it an item appeared in Earl Wilson's column that Jean Seberg *had joined the ranks of nude actresses, that Robert Rossen had closed the set in order to photograph the love scene.*

And Jean, this apparently nice, sweet, innocent woman, went up the wall. After all, what was her family in Marshalltown going to say? And, *after all*, it was a lie! Angrily she confronted Rossen, who was also the producer, but he denied planting the story. Finally she checked with a Vice-President at Columbia (which was to release the picture) who had been her lawyer. And he admitted the story *was* a plant. She demanded a retraction, and dutifully one appeared. In it were quotes from her family, how glad they were that she had not appeared nude. And she vowed she never would. But—sixteen years later—she did. With the blanket for a prop and the cramped floor of the back seat of her car for a

set, she played her own death scene that way.

In 1963 she lived in Paris, having starred in "Breathless" (1959), directed by Jean-Luc Godard, one of the early—maybe the first—and certainly among the most significant of those pictures in the movement in French Cinema that came to be called "The New Wave." Playing opposite the renowned Jean-Paul Belmondo—who, himself, became an archetype—she was the quintessential expatriate American Girl—a forerunner of many similar to appear in the next few years—selling the Paris *Herald Tribune* on the Paris streets. That the French she spoke had a heavy American accent was part of her charm. And at the end of the picture she betrays her lover to the police who gun him down in the street.

The picture's theme is also a serious probing and expression of Sartre's Existentialism which flowered in artistic expressions of all kinds in the '50s, into the '60s, and perhaps—in enclaves—flowers, fortunately, still. There is that memorable line that Belmondo speaks: "Between grief and nothing, I'll take grief." How sad and ironic that at the end, in 1979, in what might have been the prime of her life, Jean chose *nothing*. Of grief (life), by then, she had had too much.

Her career in recent years had faltered. It was reported by "the authorities," so news reports said, that she "had been suffering from depression, had been in and out of psychiatric institutions lately." And then her second husband, Romain Gary, French author and diplomat, charged that the FBI were responsible for her insanity and eventual death.

It was with Gary she lived, quietly and demurely and unmarried, while the picture "Lilith" was being made. The liaison was, as some things in the entertainment business are, privy, not for the flacks to make noise with; and this living together, also in 1963, was not the accepted fashion. Then, in 1970, quite a to-do *was* made of the fact that Jean Seberg was hanging out with the radical Black Panthers, was with child by one or another of them. She was in fact pregnant, but not by a Panther, had a difficult carrying, and delivered a child prematurely and stillborn.



Sometime later Gary published the novel *White Dog* which is, by hearsay, supposed to detail—fictionally—some of these events. And, certainly, the bones of all this make a very interesting potential plot. It is true Jean was a “liberal” (whatever that is) when I knew her, and went activist, I’m sure. After all she was in association with French philosophic intellectual trends as well as the motion picture/literary scene of the middle and late ’60s—the time of “The Movement.” That book, *White Dog*, was optioned for a movie back then sometime, but it was never made. Now, as I read in *Variety*, since the announcement of Jean’s death (not quite so coincidentally synchronistic), with a new and ugly furor a new large Hollywood producer has announced the assumption of the property with immediate plans for production and release. Given that there is, in the movie business, many a slip ’twixt cup and lip, this picture may never be made either; still, would this have happened if Gary hadn’t

reiterated, after her death, that the Black Panther stories were an FBI fiction (in fact she won a lawsuit with *Newsweek* over it at the time), that the uproar back then was instrumental in causing her troubled pregnancy, the stillbirth, and the subsequent psychological deterioration? Every year, Gary charged, on the anniversary of the stillbirth, Jean had attempted suicide. Her life was wrecked. Her choice to make a life for better or worse was usurped; see: the human being as pawn!

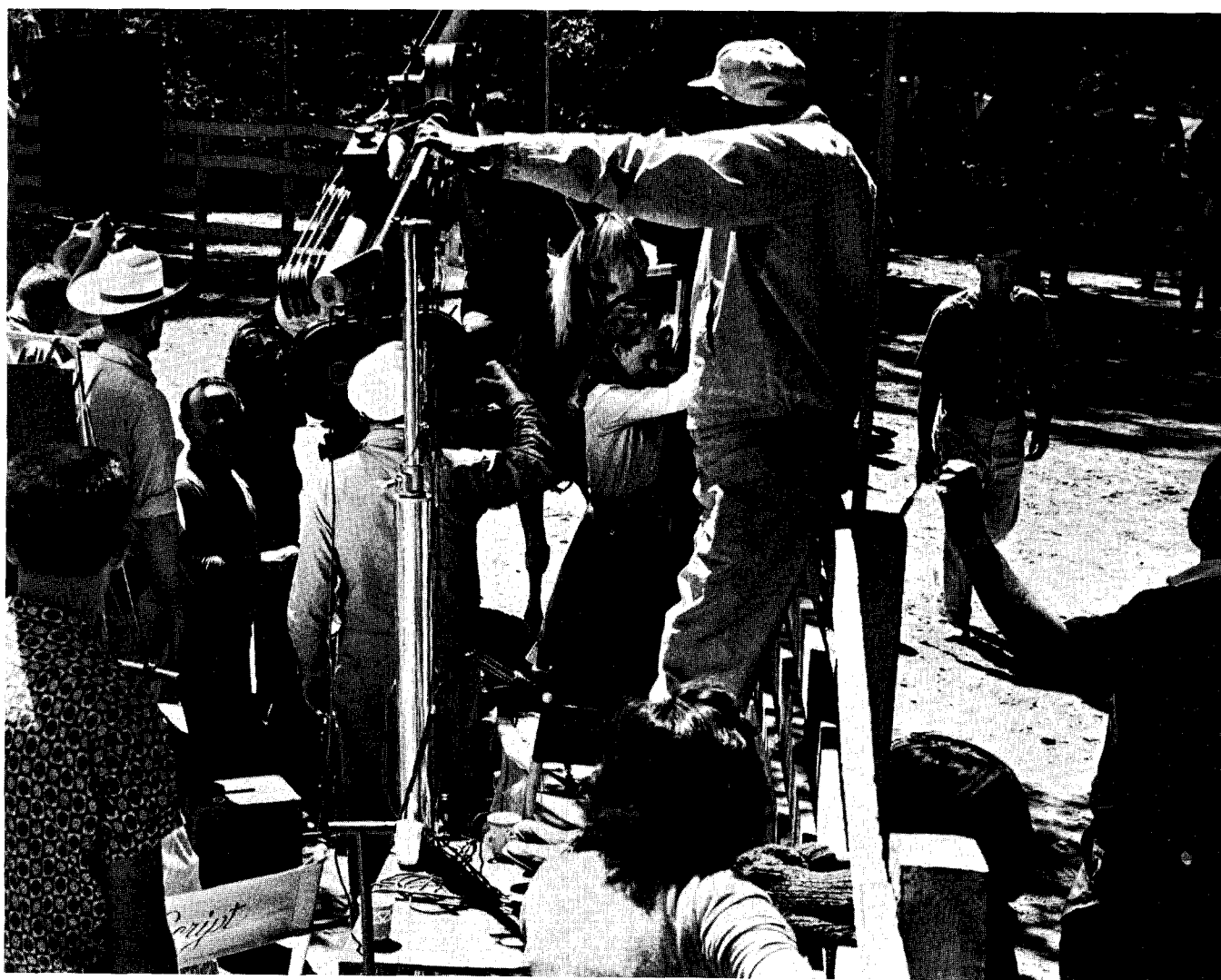
* * *

“It is felt that the possible publication of Seberg’s plight could cause her embarrassment and serve to cheapen her image with the general public.”

The above is a quote from the FBI memo the L.A. office sent to Hoover in Washington in 1970. This and other related documents, released through invocation of the “Freedom of Information” Act in the few days after her death and Gary’s charges in

1979, substantiate those charges. He was right on. Back then Washington (Hoover) approved the plan but suggested waiting until the pregnancy was “more obvious.” Which they did, and seven years later Jean Seberg did herself in.

In our times these sorts of revelations are not new nor, unfortunately, infrequent. We wallow, it appears, in a morass of corruption—political and industrial and legal and personal. In fact it has become almost a litany, and then an abstraction that we, perhaps, make to protect ourselves from revulsion, or because we are also culpable, or because we just don’t give a damn. I am not less guilty, but when I read all this about somebody I knew and liked—a nice girl from Marshalltown, Iowa—I am suddenly incensed. This is an obscene action, this frightful exploitation and sacrifice of human beings for some gain—in this case, political. And then I think but they—the FBI—went right to the heart of it—plucked the vulnerable string—*knew* (which is scary) where to



penetrate her—in her eminently Puritan Marshalltown roots.

And what's the degree of moral difference between all that and a producer's picking up an option on *White Dog*. Who is going to cast the first stone? In "Lilith's" plot Jean's breakdown, and the suicide of another patient in the sanatorium (Peter Fonda) who loves her, are a structural double gonzo perpetrated by the cowardly and/or crazy manipulation of the third member (Warren Beatty) of the persecutor-victim-rescuer dramatic triangle which is the essence of theatre. But that's all fiction and the story of Jean Seberg's death is real: life emulates art; art follows life. *Who is going to cast the first stone?*

2.

*"... innocence was in the streets of Europe;
... guilt was in the Cabinets."*

On May 6, 1910, the benevolent and paternal king of England, Edward VII, son of Queen Victoria, died quite suddenly. The gathering for his funeral of representatives from 70 nations, including 40 Imperial Royal Highnesses, 9 crowned heads of Europe—most of them the descendants and consorts of descendants of that same Queen—and ex-President Theodore Roosevelt from the United States, according to Barbara Tuchman, marked the transition from one age to another. And Edward's funeral is the first sequence in the documentary film, "Guns of August," adapted from Tuchman's Pulitzer Prize winning book. Narrated by Fritz Weaver, created and produced by Nathan Kroll, its subject matter is World War I, presented in motion picture newsreels and still pictures from the time.

In the funeral sequence is a shot of an avenue full of fantastically uniformed men on prancing horses—the royalty in the cortège—then a shot of a closed coach in which rode Roosevelt. It must have galled him, I think, that according to protocol, so the narrator said, he could not ride with kings. And the contrast of the two shots informs that piece of information. You think of Teddy—who in our present age of few heroes *is* one—tried and true—from the past, and how he certainly must have viewed himself the equal of any king, and how he must have liked to ride



horseback. He could have worn his colonel's uniform, vintage the First Volunteer United States Cavalry, *The Rough Riders* and the charge up San Juan hill. It would have been *Bully!*

How the visuals—with their accepted concomitant diminution of depth—bring all this to an immediate present, at least to the history buff that I am. You see the fashions of the times, people in formal clothes at race meets, walking their dogs in the park. At the funeral you see the principals in the upcoming events, all related to one another: Kaiser Wilhelm, Franz-Joseph of Austria-Hungary (whom the Kaiser had pledged to support), Czar Nicholas II of Russia, and the new young king, George V, of England. France was suffering from the shame of her defeat by Germany in 1870; there were all those machinations in the Balkans; interlocking treaties between rulers who were kinsmen. One country built up its navy—see the shots of the ponderous dreadnoughts of those days—the other, refusing to be second best or one down, did likewise. It is a series of steps in what appears to be the inevitable progression to war, which, in any case, so it was said, would be over in a matter of weeks.

But, so the film avers, nobody

wanted war—except the generals who had nothing else to do but plan their strategies, lay out their tactics. There were demonstrations and speeches, political action on the part of the Socialists; the film visualizes a last weekend of peace in the summer of 1914. There was in France, in the French Army, some spirit of force called *élan vital*—the all conquering will. The film shows the French troops in their 19th Century uniforms, the narrator talking about their anachronistic red pantaloons.

But, in the beginning, before Germany attacked France by going through Belgium, after the assassination of the Grand Duke in Sarajevo (does anybody know where that infamous city is?), the Kaiser was calling his cousin, Nicky, the Czar, on the phone, pleading with him not to make this or that move. The British fleet was moved to its winter base in Scotland to prevent a sneak submarine attack. "The lights are going out all over Europe," somebody said, "we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime." Germany, Kaiser Wilhelm II, had loosed war on the continent by giving Austria-Hungary a blank check.

There are the scenes of mobilization, the precise detail of what it took

to call up the massive armies. Britain was the only country that did not have conscription. The narrator is talking dispassionately: how governments had mismanaged the situation, how the people must pay. In the black and white newsreels (all newsreels are in black and white—are the past and its events for certain generations seen only in this way?) the trains are pulling out, men waving from the windows, slogans painted on the car sides. And only 50 hours earlier people had been demonstrating for peace. Now, thousands are going off to fight. Now the people are manipulated into supporting the war.

The Germans attack through Belgium like a scythe, checked only momentarily and bloodily at Liege by the heroic and poorly armed Belgian army, then rolling up the left side of the French line, the German 1st Army threatening Paris within a month. On the Eastern Front the Russians are almost immediately defeated, at Tannenberg in East Prussia, suffering 30,000 casualties. It takes 60 trains to carry back to German prison camps the 92,000 who are captured. The vaunted invincibility of the Cossacks is laid to rest. Then, the Western Front, the shots of the files of taxis, the so-called 600 of them, that took the French Army to the Marne and the line of trenches dug to defend Paris, less than 25 miles away. The Marne was Germany's first major defeat, the victory credited to *élan vital*.

Time passes and the picture changes, the uniforms change. The Germans are shown wearing their spiked helmets, and then the helmets got a cloth cover for the sake of camouflage, and that evolved into the sinister pot which gave more protection against the shrapnel in the trenches—the ornamental spike long gone. And, by this time, whatever chivalry and glory war pretended to was long gone too. What World War I became was a special hell of mud and slime, the stalemate and the terrible attrition of files of men charging across blasted fields into the enfiladed fire of heavy machine guns. In the beginning you see cavalry and horsedrawn artillery, then later on the camions and awkward tanks. Back home there are pictures of women in factories—the skirts grow shorter. There is the unrestricted war at sea, ships sliding beneath the waves; German submarines made the war in

Europe into a World War. The trenches, the stalemate, Verdun where there were a million casualties, 250,000 known dead on both sides. Poison gas was used first by the Germans at Ypres; at the Somme the British regiments attacked in waves, directly into the machine guns, suffering 58,000 dead in one day. The airplane becomes a factor (Hermann Goering was a German pilot); the anti-aircraft gun is developed in defense. The United States enters; the Germans were reported to be conspiring with Mexico to attack us; 400,000 men were drafted—14,000 landed in France; eventually 2 million odd serve there. At first the troops wear the old wide-brimmed campaign hats, then the overseas caps appear. There is a revolution in Russia, and they sign a peace treaty giving away Finland. At the film's end the visuals are rows of gravestones with the titles over: thirty-seven and one half million total casualties, seven and three quarter million missing or prisoners, twenty-four and one quarter million wounded, and eight and one half million dead!

And after it's over, there's a disquieting thought. Before World War I started, between Edward's funeral in 1910 and the Grand Duke's assassination in 1914, the people were more or less ignorant of the absurd machinations of the power structure. After the guns of August the people were the fodder, their spirit manipulated through propaganda to support their own immolation. Watching it I wanted to yell: "HEY! WATCH OUT WHAT'S HAPPENING!" Then, after the show is over I'm thinking, Hey, that's similar to how we feel now—us people. War seems unthinkable, who would threaten nuclear annihilation for political reasons? Remember *Better Red than Dead?* But suddenly, last month, Soviet combat troops are "discovered" in Cuba (they have been there for 17 years or so). There is talk of a *new* Cuban crisis, and SALT II is hostage.

* * *

I remember the last Cuban crisis very well. We were sitting around on a movie location shooting a complex funeral scene in a city 50 miles from Oak Ridge, Tennessee—an obvious target. We were waiting to hear if the Russian ships, the missiles on their decks like fat cigar cases in the black and white newsreel film on TV,

would turn back at Kennedy's ultimatum. We were making hollow movie jokes about what happened if they didn't.

Now, there's Carter's present problem, and, heaven forfend, a real face-to-face crisis, an armed confrontation, a little saber rattling and big sticking is a good way of turning off the heat that's under you in favor of a heat against "the common enemy" out there. Nobody means to push too far, you understand, but it happens in steps, at the end of which is—

With reference to the fact that the Soviets have not abjectly offered to remove their combat/training (which ever you call it) brigade, Charles Cordry of the Baltimore *Sun*, on the fine Public Television program, "Washington Week in Review," spoke on a recent Friday night about "an opinion, widely shared in Europe and here, that the Soviets will reach a peak of military power in the early 1980s, and are likely to do something about it." (It is equally true, of course, that external political action takes the heat off in totalitarian societies too.) In Europe they are interested in the *medium* range *tactical* nuclear weapons—what's going to get them—in which the Soviets have the edge 5 to 1. Should the Soviets move in Europe will somebody push the big red button for the strategic intercontinentals, or will the holocaust be limited to Europe—a *little* nuclear war? And how much does it matter what we people think? After "Guns of August" I wanted to get on the telephone and alert somebody. "Those who fail to learn from history . . ." right? So, who do you call?

3. Guinness

"With hind-sight, from the age of 7 on I wanted to be an actor, but it never occurred to me until the age of



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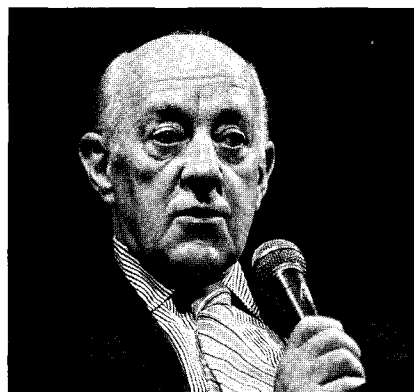
(signature) **Robley Wilson, Jr., Editor**

15 that you could actually earn your living at it . . . I didn't know how to go about it. I went into an advertising agency about the age of eighteen to be a copywriter . . . ”

“In cinema first of all there's the script—when the script arrives and I start reading it, I want to be entertained by what I read . . . and if the script pleases me, and they usually say what role they are thinking of me for, then I begin to think, well, can I fit into that . . . ?”

“I think when you read the script, it's like a novel, you begin to visualize the character concerned, and then I look around to find a walk like that character, or think like that character . . .

“I used to think I couldn't start on a character until I knew how they walked—and that's because when I was a drama student without a penny in the world to spend, I had nothing to do but follow people in the street, watching their walk, beginning to imitate it, and then, maybe, I would begin to feel like maybe they would feel . . . ”



“I'm a theatre actor basically, I think. My background is theatre, and I always try to do something in it every year . . .

“I'm not aware of any comedic style, particularly, but I am aware I have all sorts of regrettable idiosyncrasies . . .

“ . . . but, for instance, if you play a part in the theatre, I've always maintained, and shocked everyone, you've got to play it as if it were the most serious, dead earnest, you could possible play, and then you can come out funny . . . ”

“All parts are hard, but I think comedy parts tax an actor more . . .

“Once I've done something I try to forget it. I want to be on to the next thing . . . ”

“I have no capacity for any other careers. I think now, in my old age, I

would have loved to have been a writer. The writing I've done has all been absolutely amateur. But a writer's life, at this moment, seems to be a very admirable one. I mean you do it on your own—if you've got a publisher, that is . . .



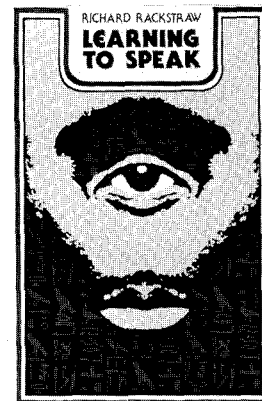
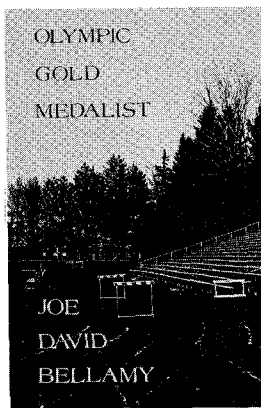
“I got to doing the script for “Horse's Mouth” because I was working on a movie that was so boring I used to sit around the set trying to occupy myself. I can't read in a film studio—not enjoyably anyway—and I like fishing so I took to tying my own flies—you know—the little bits of silk and feathers and so on. But when I got a bit of feather in my mouth and some gum on my hands they would say: ‘Oh, we're ready for you now—’ and the whole thing would unravel. So, I gave that up . . . I had been reading the book. I took a pad of paper and said, well, I am going to write my own script which is not going to be as boring as the one I'm doing.”



“Nothing lasts as far as I can make out in the entertainment world for more than a decade. People get sick of what's going on and then it moves on to something new. I'm looking forward to something new very much . . .

“If someone were to say, ‘was he an actor or wasn't he?’—well, I would say, look at ‘Tunes of Glory.’ ”

—Lawrence Sturhahn



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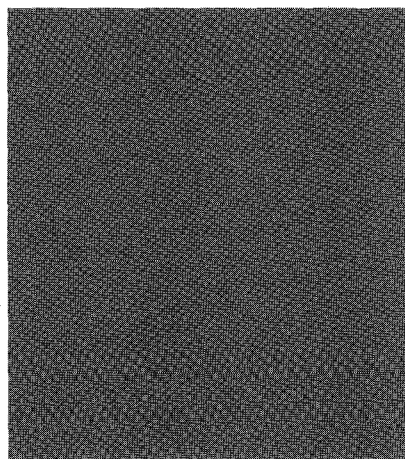
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